

# Mobilizing Compatriots:

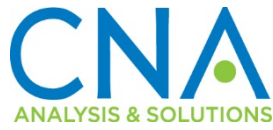
## Russia's Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the Former Soviet Union

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With contributions by Dmitry Gorenburg and Michael Markowitz

November 2015





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**Approved by:**

**November 2015**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken E. Gause". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ken E. Gause, Director  
International Affairs Group  
Center for Strategic Studies

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| <b>14. ABSTRACT</b><br>Russia's seizure of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine has provoked considerable discussion-but relatively little analysis-of Moscow's objectives and policies toward Russian communities in the former Soviet region. This study aims to fill key gaps in U.S. analysis of Russia's strategic and operational calculus toward Russia's "compatriots," as the Russian government terms ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers, and others with ties to the Russian Federation living outside the country. One key conclusion is that while Russian President Vladimir Putin has been prepared to take significant risks when he perceives threats to Russia's national interests, especially along its borders, and has been ready to consider compatriots as a policy tool, his foreign policy is fundamentally defensive. The study also finds that notwithstanding Moscow's efforts to employ Russian compatriots as a policy instrument, Russia faces many constraints in doing so. Nevertheless, we determine, the United States and Russia have fundamentally different definitions of Moscow's appropriate role in its neighborhood and absent changes, further tension and even conflict remain likely in the future. Russian compatriots will be important in many if not most of these disputes. |                         |                               |                                   |   |  |
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## Executive Summary

Understanding the Russian government's attitudes and policies toward ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, and others with ties to the Russian Federation in other former Soviet countries has become critically important in the wake of Moscow's seizure of Crimea and support for eastern Ukrainian separatists—both of which Russia has justified as necessary to defend these populations. In this paper, we have sought to provide a preliminary assessment of Moscow's perspectives, policies, strategic calculus, and operational instruments in dealing with these groups, which the Russian government describes as *sootechestvenniki*, or “compatriots.”

Russia's government defines the term *compatriots* broadly to incorporate not only ethnic Russians and Russian speakers but also their families as well as others who may have cultural or other connections to the Russian Federation—including its non-Russian ethnic groups—directly or through relatives. Compatriots may have descended from former subjects of the tsarist empire or Soviet-era migrants (including those encouraged to resettle as a part of the USSR's Russification policies) or may have migrated more recently. The countries with the largest shares of ethnic Russians in their populations are Estonia, Kazakhstan, and Latvia (23-27%) and Ukraine (17%).

## Russian foreign policy and decision-making

Moscow has identified protection of and support for compatriot populations as a foreign policy priority since shortly after Russia's independence, and official Russian foreign policy and national security documents routinely cite it as such. Nevertheless, in practical terms, Russian compatriots have often been more visible as instruments of broader Russian foreign aims than as objects of Russian policy themselves. Thus Russia's compatriot policy is best analyzed within the context of the Russian government's overall foreign policy goals as well as its objectives within its immediate neighborhood—the former Soviet region.

Though Russia's foreign policy conduct is increasingly assertive, in our judgment Russian president Vladimir Putin sees Russia as a conservative power acting in defense of its own vital interests in the region and elsewhere. This is the case even in Syria, where Moscow sees a serious threat in the potential return of Russian

Federation citizens and citizens of other former Soviet states (probably including some Russian compatriots) to their home countries to promote violent extremist ideologies and conduct terrorist attacks. Closer to Russia, President Putin—and most of Russia’s foreign policy elite and public—sees his country as a great power, something that inherently requires stability and a generally secure environment within its neighborhood so that it can exercise its appropriate role on the global stage. This in turn calls for significant influence in the former Soviet region.

That said, President Putin’s decision-making often appears tactical rather than strategic and few if any within his inner circle seem to challenge his perspectives, goals, or approaches in defining Russia’s foreign and national security policy. Russia’s seizure of Crimea and support for eastern Ukraine’s separatist forces fit this pattern. While the former move was immediately successful, it has created a variety of predictable challenges and dilemmas for Russian policy—especially in view of the limited financial and military commitment Mr. Putin has made so far in the Donbas.

In seeking to influence the former Soviet region, Russian compatriots can be useful to Moscow in many ways. Their very existence strengthens Russia’s argument that there is a “Russian world” (*Russkiy mir*) larger than Russia itself that lends legitimacy to both Russia’s great power status and its regional aspirations. To the extent that they identify with Russia not only culturally but also politically, Russian compatriots can amplify Russia’s political influence in the former USSR and provide political, economic, and military intelligence. Where they are alienated from governments in their countries of residence—a condition to which Moscow can contribute—their alienation from their own governments creates latent potential for unrest and another possible lever. Protecting compatriots is also politically useful both at home, to rally support, and internationally, where it can benefit Russia’s public diplomacy.

## Russia’s influence operations

Operationally, Russia attempts to influence compatriots and their governments through several channels. The Russian government works directly with compatriots through *Rossotrudnichestvo*, a government agency analogous to the U.S. Agency for International Development that also has specific responsibility for assisting compatriots, and through its semi-governmental *Rusky Mir* Foundation, which promotes Russian language and culture. Other tools include an extensive information operations campaign that aims to spread *dezinformatsiya*, or disinformation. This includes Russian state media, such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik; private media in Russia and other countries; social media, and cyber-attacks. In addition, business and economic relationships, corruption, and the Russian Orthodox Church are critical tools for influencing compatriots in the former Soviet region.

## Implications

We conclude that Russia’s approach and policies toward Russian compatriots have several key implications for U.S. policy and, indeed, for Russia’s own policy. The following table (Table 1) briefly lists implications for Russia, and strategic and operational implications for U.S. policy.

Table 1. Implications for U.S. and Russia's policies

| Implications for Russia  |  |
|--|--|
| Using compatriots requires not only cultural but political identification with Russia.                                 |  |
| Using compatriots may produce diminishing returns if they produce backlash in home countries.                          |  |
| Failing to deliver tangible benefits could alienate compatriots.   |  |
| Compatriots are a blunt instrument not fully subject to Moscow’s control.  |  |
| Provoking violent conflict is dangerous for compatriots and for Russia.  |  |
| Reintegrating compatriots into Russia weakens their role as instruments of influence elsewhere.                        |  |
| U.S. Strategic Implications  |  |
| Existing Western and Russian definitions of regional security are incompatible and will remain a source of tension.    |  |
| Russia’s leadership is prepared to take significant—perhaps even seemingly irrational—risks to defend vital interests. |  |
| Moscow may be open to mutually satisfactory understandings to promote regional stability.                              |  |
| Tensions over Russian compatriot populations are likely to endure.   |  |
| Effective host government management of compatriot populations’ grievances reduces vulnerability to Russian pressure.  |  |

### U.S. Operational Implications

Better understanding Russia's policy and actions toward compatriots is critical for U.S. policy.

U.S. messaging to compatriot populations is no less important than wider messaging in the region.

Corruption creates additional pathways for Russian influence in compatriot communities and beyond.

Russia is likely to continue cyber-attacks, especially in states with significant and dissatisfied compatriot populations.



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## Glossary

|      |   |
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| CIS  | Commonwealth of Independent States                    |
| CSTO | Collective Security Treaty Organization               |
| GDP  | Gross domestic product                                |
| IO   | Information operations                                |
| IRC  | Information-related capabilities                      |
| OSCE | Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  |
| RT   | Russia Today  |
| SBU  | Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy (Ukrainian security services) |

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## Introduction

Since the start of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its hybrid warfare campaign in eastern Ukraine, policy experts and practitioners alike have been closely monitoring Russia's efforts to influence and potentially reintegrate the Baltic States, Ukraine, Moldova, and Kazakhstan into a Russia-centric political and economic space. These countries are all states of the former Soviet Union that have sizable ethnic Russian populations and Russian-speaking communities. As such, they present Vladimir Putin and the Russian government with an opportunity to exert influence over ethnic Russian populations by supporting local pro-Russian organizations, businesses, and Russian cultural events, and the Russian Orthodox Church. While it is not new for compatriots to feel a continuing attachment to Russia or even to consider reintegration attractive, what has become more eye opening is *how* and *why* Vladimir Putin is using Russia's strategic influence over Russian ethnic populations in the neighboring states. These actions have profound implications for U.S. and Western policy toward Russia, Europe, and Central Asia as the United States explores options for engagement and containment in the region in the years to come.

As part of its wider efforts to assess the implications of Russia's foreign and national security policy, CNA initiated this study to examine Russia's objectives, policy, and strategic and operational calculus with respect to ethnic Russian, Russian-speaking, and other potentially sympathetic populations residing in other former Soviet states. This is a quick-response, three-month effort designed to stimulate public discourse around Russia's efforts to use these communities, which Moscow defines as *compatriots*, to further its policy goals. The study highlights several important implications that U.S. policy-makers may consider in formulating policy toward Russia and the countries in which these compatriot populations reside. After releasing this report, the study team plans to organize an event to discuss these topics at CNA headquarters in fall 2015.

## Constraints

In view of the study team's aim to encourage public discussion, this report is unclassified and cleared for public release. Our analysis relied on data from primary open sources, in Russian and in English. Because this is a rapid-response assessment, we did not conduct interviews in the United States or the former Soviet Union.

Likewise, we did not conduct in-depth analysis on how the United States, allied countries, and host governments of the former Soviet Union countries are working to counter Russian policies and operational tactics. Russia's increasing assertiveness as a great power warrants further research in this area, particularly in the wake of Moscow's seizure of Crimea and its ongoing assistance to separatist forces in eastern Ukraine.

## **Organization of this paper**

This paper includes five broad sections. First, we define Russian compatriots and provide an overview of Russian compatriot populations in the former Soviet Union and their host governments' relations with them. Second, we discuss Russia's foreign policy objectives toward its compatriots abroad. Third, we examine the compatriots' role in Russia's strategic calculus and decision-making, and the varied perspectives of Russia's foreign policy elites. Fourth, we discuss Russia's operational calculus toward its compatriots and the channels through which it seeks to influence compatriots and host governments in their countries of residence, including information operations, economic relationships and corruption, and the Russian Orthodox Church. We conclude by highlighting implications for the United States to consider as it formulates its policies toward Russia and other former Soviet countries.

# Who Are the Russian Compatriots?

Russian president Vladimir Putin has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years by calling the dissolution of the Soviet Union the “greatest geopolitical disaster of the previous century.” In a press conference in December 2013, the president partially redacted that statement:

I meant, first and foremost, the humanitarian consequences of that process... people lived within the borders of one country, where there was no difference between Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan. What difference did it make? They were all the same... And that, moreover, was a tremendous advantage of such a community, such an enormous state. There were specific pluses, certain great advantages. But that’s what happened. One-day people woke up, and no one had asked them, and the country was gone. Suddenly they realized that they were situated abroad...<sup>1</sup>

In this section we examine the situation of Russia’s diaspora in some of the major post-Soviet states and the attempts by host governments to integrate those populations. We then provide an overview of various states’ successes and failures integrating their Russian compatriot populations.

## Definitions

While in English the word “Russian” can refer to both citizens of the Russian Federation and ethnic Russians, the Russian language uses two separate terms to describe these populations with greater granularity:

- *russkiy*, which refers to ethnic Russians, and
- *rossiski*, which refers to citizens of the Russian Federation.

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks by Russian president Vladimir Putin on Russian television, Россия 24, 19 December 2013.

A third term, *sootchestvennikii*, or “compatriots,” encompasses *both* of these categories as well as individuals connected to Russia by culture or family background. The Russian government defines *compatriots* broadly, to include persons demonstrating “commonality of language, history, cultural heritage, traditions and customs (with the Russian state) and their direct relatives,” persons “living beyond the borders of the Russian Federation having...spiritual, cultural, and legal connections with (Russia),” or “persons whose direct relatives lived on the territory of the Russian Federation or the Soviet Union.”<sup>2</sup> Since the purpose of this paper is to assess Russian policy, we use term “compatriots”—with the Russian government’s definition—in the analysis that follows.

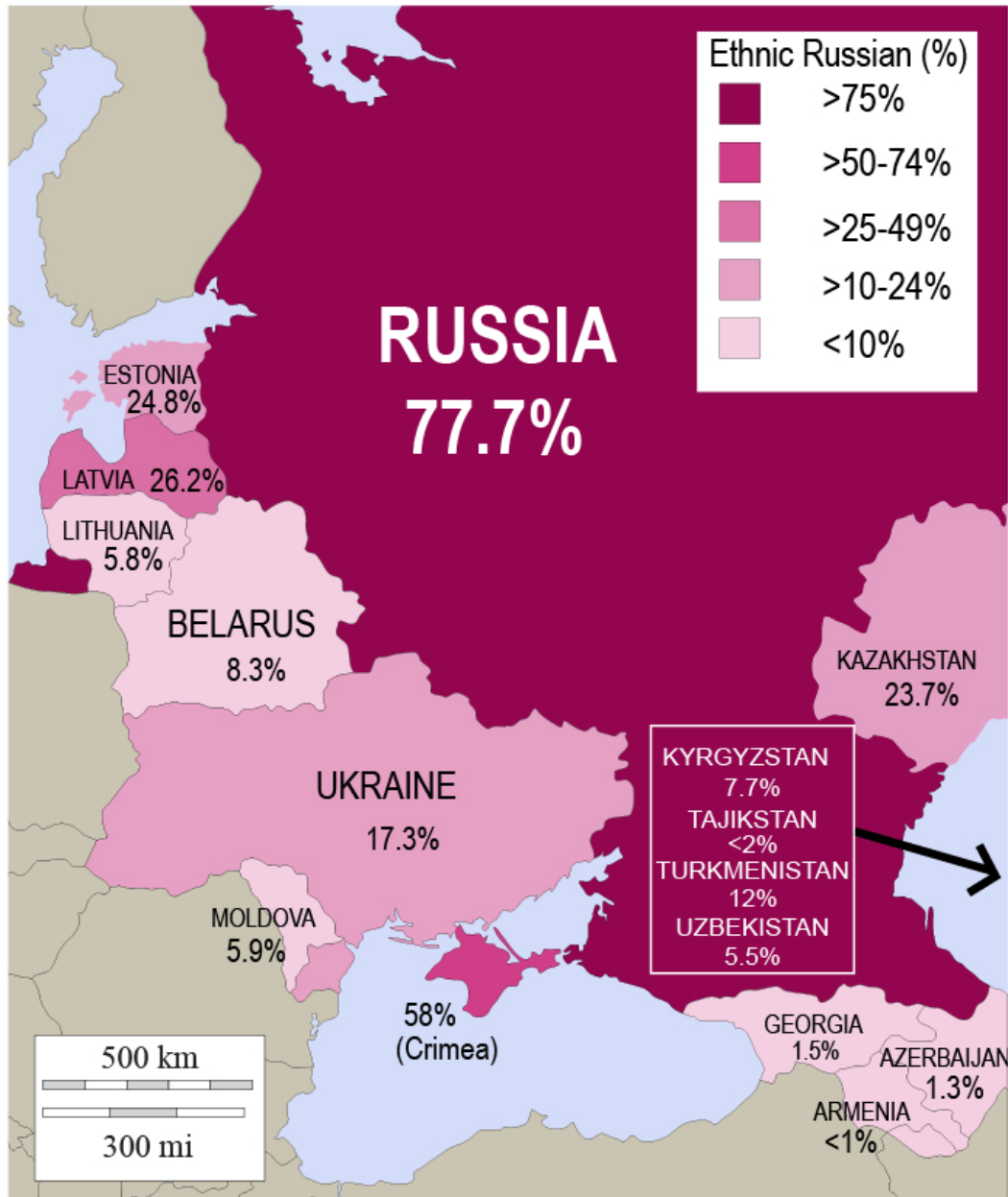
Nevertheless, the ability to speak Russian does not inherently produce loyalty to Russia. It is important to recall that the Soviet political and social system created strong pressures—and strong incentives—for members of non-Russian ethnic groups to speak Russian. In addition to active Russification policies, Russian language ability was in some ways a key to entering groups of political and economic elites centered around the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Komsomol (Young Communists’ League), and government institutions. (One could face suspicion by continuing to use another language in these settings.) Over two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the pressure to speak Russian no longer exists (outside Russia) and the incentives to do so are much weaker. With this in mind, the fact that many in older generations learned and used Russian to advance their careers—and may not have learned to speak national languages well—does not necessarily make them more receptive to present-day Moscow’s political objectives.

Interestingly, Russian president Vladimir Putin has recently referred more frequently to *russskiy* (ethnic Russians). In the past, he more commonly referred to *rossisskiy* (Russian citizens). Since the annexation of Crimea, he has spoken increasingly of ethnic Russians (*russskiy*) abroad. This shift appears to reflect an effort to satisfy and promote Russian nationalism and cultural unity beyond the political borders of the Russian Federation. The term “compatriots” is still prevalent in governmental literature. The figure below depicts ethnic Russian populations in the European portion of the former Soviet Union.

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<sup>2</sup> Федеральный закон о государственной политике Российской Федерации в отношении соотечественников за рубежом, 23 July 2010

Figure 1. Percentage of ethnic Russians residing outside of Russia in former Soviet Union states



Source: Michael Markowitz, CNA (percentages taken from the *CIA World Factbook*).

## Russian compatriots abroad

Russian compatriots abroad originated in multiple waves of both forced and voluntary migration, extending as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many ethnic Russians who had settled on the periphery of the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union found themselves “displaced abroad.” The Russian Academy of Sciences estimates these populations to number approximately 30 million.<sup>3</sup> In this section, we focus on some of the most significant of Russia’s compatriot populations abroad: those in Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Kazakhstan.

Since census data in former Soviet states do not use Russian government classifications—and therefore do not count Russian compatriots—it is complex and somewhat contentious to estimate their numbers. Prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union, over 25 million ethnic Russians lived in Soviet republics outside the Russian federation.<sup>4</sup> Though many migrated to Russia during the 1990s, sizeable populations remain in several countries. Estonia (24.8%), Latvia (26.2%), Ukraine (17.3%) and Kazakhstan (23.7%) each have ethnic Russian populations exceeding 15%, and thus likely have the largest Russian communities in proportional terms.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic Russians make up smaller shares of the population in the other post-Soviet states. In addition, significant numbers of non-Russians consider Russian to be their primary language of communication. This includes 15% of the population in Kazakhstan, 12% in (pre-conflict) Ukraine, 10% in Latvia, and 4% in Estonia.<sup>6</sup>

While the Baltic States of Latvia and Estonia were once part of the Russian Empire, most of the ethnic Russians there trace their origins to the Soviet era,<sup>7</sup> when Soviet policy pursued a Russification policy across the USSR. When the Baltic States regained their independence, they strongly asserted their national and cultural

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<sup>3</sup> С.В. Рязанцев, А.А. Гребенюк, ««Наши» За Границей: Русские, Россияне, Русскоговорящие, Соотечественники: Расселение, Интеграция и Возвратная Миграция в Россию,» Российская Академия Наук: Институт Социально-Политических Исследований, Москва, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Kolstoe, *Russians in the Former Soviet Republics* (Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.mercator-research.eu/minority-languages/language-factsheets/minority-languages-in-education-in-the-baltics/>; <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62424>; [http://database.ukrcensus.gov.ua/MULT/Database/Census/databasetree\\_uk.asp](http://database.ukrcensus.gov.ua/MULT/Database/Census/databasetree_uk.asp).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Coalson, “Putin Pledges to Protect All Ethnic Russians Anywhere. So, Where Are They?” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 10, 2014. <http://www.rferl.org/>. Former Soviet leader Josef Stalin was People’s Commissar for Nationalities before becoming General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and played a key role in Soviet nationalities policy.

traditions. The constitution of Estonia designates Estonian as the official state language, but it provides protections for minority languages, devolving some authority for language use to local government.<sup>8</sup> The constitution of Latvia designates Latvian as the official language. It only affirms the right of ethnic minorities to “preserve and develop their language.”<sup>9</sup> In both countries, ethnic Russian populations are concentrated in urban areas near the Russian border and in the capital cities of Tallinn and Riga.<sup>10</sup>

Ukraine’s ethnic makeup generally correlates with the country’s geography. Most ethnic Russians are located in the eastern and southern oblasts of the country, where Russian is the predominant language.<sup>11</sup> While the western part of Ukraine is generally more European leaning, Russian language use remains common in major cities throughout the country. In Crimea, Stalin’s mass deportation of Crimean Tatars and the Russian naval presence led to the near-complete Russification of the local population, which the Ukrainian government was not able to reverse after independence. Odessa, a Black Sea port and major trade hub, is also predominantly Russian speaking, as are major cities in eastern Ukraine such as Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk.

Ethnic Russians account for approximately 6% of Moldova’s population of 3.5 million, and an additional 10% of the population consider Russian their primary language.<sup>12</sup> The majority of the Russian population is in Moldova’s east, in the breakaway region of Transnistria, which borders on southern Ukraine. (In fact, its capital of Tiraspol is only 60 miles from Odessa.) Russia’s 14<sup>th</sup> Army—numbering 1,200 soldiers—remains there as peacekeepers and to prevent Transnistria’s integration into Moldova.<sup>13</sup> Moldova is among the poorest countries in Europe.

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter 1, Section 52, Constitution of the Republic of Estonia.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 1, Section 114, Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.

<sup>10</sup> “Population by sex, ethnic nationality and Country, 1 January,” *stat.ee. Statistics Estonia*, 2015-01-01, [http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=PO0222&path=../I\\_Databas/Population/01Population\\_indicators\\_and\\_composition/04Population\\_figure\\_and\\_composition/&lang=1](http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=PO0222&path=../I_Databas/Population/01Population_indicators_and_composition/04Population_figure_and_composition/&lang=1).

<sup>11</sup> “Ukraine: Percentage Who Identify As Ethnic Russians Or Say Russian Is Their First Language?” *Ukrucensus 2001*, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, August 19, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Federica Prina, “Language Policies or Language Politics? The Case of Moldova,” paper presented at the conference on “Minority representation and minority language rights: Origins, experiences and lessons to be learned,” October 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Srebrnik, “The Frozen Conflict Between Moldova and Transnistria,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.pe.ca>.

The ethnic Russian population in Kazakhstan has declined significantly over the last two decades due to migration to Russia. Between 1989 and 2009, the ethnic Russian population of Kazakhstan declined by 2.5 million people, dropping from 37% to 24% of the total population. Of the Russians remaining in Kazakhstan, exceedingly few—approximately 3%—speak Kazakh fluently.<sup>14</sup> Russian serves as the language of interethnic communication in Kazakhstan, another legacy of Soviet-era Russification policies, and many urban Kazakhs still use Russian as their primary language.<sup>15</sup> Today, pragmatic education policies promote the Russian language in order to encourage economic engagement with Kazakhstan's northern neighbor.

## Integration programs

The constitutions of the Baltic States, Ukraine, Moldova, and Kazakhstan each protect and guarantee the rights of ethnic minorities living within their territories. However, the degree to which these legal provisions are implemented and enforced varies from country to country. In each of the post-Soviet states, responsibility for integrating minority populations is shared by a number of ministries and departments.

In Estonia, the citizenship law requires applicants to demonstrate proficiency in the notoriously complex national language.<sup>16</sup> The Estonian government has passed initiatives to increase minority access to Estonian language instruction.

In Latvia, the National Integration Centre, a project of Latvia's Society Integration Foundation, works to ensure and improve the availability of various aid services to third-country nationals (those who are neither Latvian citizens nor citizens of other European Union countries), while helping them integrate into Latvian society, and promoting understanding about migration and migrants within Latvian society.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse, *The Russian Minority in Central Asia: Migration, Politics, and Language*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Kennan Institute Occasional Paper Series #297, Washington, DC, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> K. Aminov, V. Jensen, S. Juraev, I. Overland, D. Tyan, Y. Uulu, "Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia," *Central Asia Regional Data Review* 2, No. 1, Spring 2010.

<sup>16</sup> In 2014, only 21% of Russians resident in Estonia were fluent in the Estonian language. Statistics available online, "Integration in Estonian Society," Estonian government website. March 20, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> "Information about the project," National Integration Centre of Latvia, <http://www.integration.lv/en/>.



National Integration Centre receives its funding from the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (75%) and from the state budget (25%).<sup>18</sup>

Ukraine does not have a well-developed infrastructure for integrating its ethnic Russian minority. Because Russia and Ukraine share many linguistic and cultural commonalities, Ukrainian governments deemed it unnecessary to create a robust framework for integrating ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. In those regions of Ukraine where they reside in significant numbers, ethnic Russians are able to live and operate effectively using the Russian language. They employ passive knowledge of Ukrainian when necessary but are generally resistant to using that language.

In Kazakhstan, several government-affiliated organizations support the rights of the ethnic Russian minority, though these organizations have little political leverage. Ethnic Russians' clout was significantly diminished by the emigration of almost 40% of the group's population to Russia.<sup>19</sup> The remaining Russian diaspora there tends to organize through shared business and economic ventures.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the most prominent international organization monitoring human rights and minority rights in the region. The OSCE maintains a program office in Astana and monitoring missions in both Ukraine and Moldova. It has conducted investigations and analysis in the Baltic States, where language policies have been a particular point of controversy.

## Measuring success

In order to assess the success of post-Soviet states in integrating their ethnic Russian minorities and, by extension, Russian compatriots, we use a framework based on two metrics. First, we examine the social conditions in the state: Did the host government attempt to re-litigate the Soviet past, conferring substantially different citizenship status to minority citizens? Did the host government adopt and enact a nationalist language and social policy? Second, we examine the economic conditions in the country: Is the economic standard of living there comparable to that in Russia, or is it less favorable? Together, these metrics allow us to estimate a particular state's vulnerability to Kremlin influence: the more satisfied the Russian compatriot populations, the more difficult it will be for the Russian government to mobilize their support.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Peyrouse, *Russian Minority in Central Asia*.

Our research suggests that Lithuania is the most successful among the Baltic States in terms of integrating an ethnic Russian minority. Upon gaining its independence, Lithuania passed generous legislation that afforded full citizenship rights to any ethnic Russians previously resident on its territory—approximately 90% of the Russian population in Lithuania.<sup>20</sup> Lithuanian is the national language, but the country has not pursued a nationalist political agenda to the exclusion of its Russian or other minorities. In Lithuania, the per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is slightly higher than Russia's.<sup>21</sup> Today, there is very little ethnic tension in Lithuania: its minority populations generally feel well integrated into Lithuanian society.<sup>22</sup>

Estonia and Latvia initially adopted policies toward their ethnic Russian minorities that ranged from unaccommodating to provocative. At the moment of their secession from the Soviet Union, both of these states implemented policies that branded their sizeable minority populations—39% in the case of Estonia, 35% in Latvia—as “stateless persons.”<sup>23</sup> That legislation became a self-imposed obstacle for the Baltic governments, as the stateless minority struggled to pass language competency and citizenship examinations. The situation was partially rectified in the late 1990s and early 2000s as part of the process of accession to the European Union.<sup>24</sup> While the social situation for ethnic Russians is disadvantageous, however, the economic conditions in both countries are favorable. In Latvia, the per capita GDP is on par with Russia's; in Estonia, it exceeds Russia's by nearly 10 percent.<sup>25</sup> We do not assume, however, that the economic situation in either country is so attractive as to wholly outweigh the social exclusion that Russians experience there.

Ukraine stands out among the 14 former Soviet states other than Russia in having both ongoing tensions over Russian compatriots' language and other cultural rights and a very low per capita income relative to Russia's. Upon gaining independence,

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<sup>20</sup> “Minorities at Risk Project,” University of Maryland, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp>.

<sup>21</sup> *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lh.html>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*; and *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014: Lithuania*, State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

<sup>23</sup> *Ethnic Composition and the Protection and Promotion of National Minorities' Cultural Identity*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, and “Integration in Estonian Society,” Estonia.eu.

<sup>24</sup> For more information, see Milada Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/en.html> and <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lg.html>.

the Ukrainian government conferred full citizenship on its minority populations, to include any person who himself was a resident of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, or whose immediate family member was a resident of that state.<sup>26</sup>

It appears that Ukraine's failure was not in its treatment of the Russian minority upon independence, but in its subsequent failure to generate and support a consolidated Ukrainian national identity throughout the entirety of its territory. The population was therefore prone to nationalist tendencies associated with geography and demographics. The extent of Crimea's autonomy from Kiev has been a source of constant tension, including an effort at secession in the early 1990s and continued protests at Ukraine's language and foreign policies throughout the 2000s.<sup>27</sup>

Economic conditions in Ukraine have worsened the situation for Russian compatriots: Ukraine's per capita income was approximately 35% of Russia's in 2014, though its eastern regions are relatively wealthy compared to the rest of the country.<sup>28</sup> For these reasons, Ukraine had the highest risk of Russia exploiting its compatriot population, as became abundantly clear in the aftermath of the EuroMaidan protests in the winter of 2014.

Moldova's government initially instituted citizenship legislation that granted citizenship only to people residing on the territory of the country in 1940 and their descendants. Since the majority of ethnic Russians had arrived in Moldova after World War II, this made them stateless.<sup>29</sup> In addition, nationalistic language policies enacted in the late 1980s caused both ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians to feel discriminated against.<sup>30</sup> These factors contributed to the still-unresolved secessionist conflict in Transnistria, which is predominantly populated by ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians and enjoys de facto autonomy. The economic situation in Moldova has been worse even than in Ukraine. Moldova's per capita income amounts to just one-fifth of per capita income in Russia.

In Kazakhstan, the government has nearly excluded Russians from politics, though not by design. Kazakhstan's law requires that politics and government be conducted

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<sup>26</sup> Constitution of Ukraine, Ukrainian Government Portal online, <http://www.kmu.gov.ua/>.

<sup>27</sup> For more information, see Gwendolyn Sasse, *The Crimea Question* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/up.html>.

<sup>29</sup> *State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014: Moldova*, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Srebrnik, "Frozen Conflict."

in the Kazakh language.<sup>31</sup> The sense of societal and political marginalization felt by Russians remaining in Kazakhstan adds to the incentive to emigrate. Interestingly, the Russian government has largely not asserted itself on behalf of the Russian minority living in this region. Despite an occasional comment downplaying Kazakhstani statehood, Russia's relations with Kazakhstan demonstrate that its economic interests at times outweigh social concerns.<sup>32</sup> Also important is that unlike the governments of Ukraine and the Baltic States, Kazakhstan's government has generally respected Moscow's regional foreign policy preferences.

## Cultural and political identity are not equal

Alone, shared language, history, and culture do not guarantee that an ethnic Russian or broader Russian compatriot population will support Kremlin foreign policy—Russian cultural identity does not automatically produce Russian political identity. Affinity for not only Russia but also its policies requires something more.

Likewise, economic disappointments or even dissatisfaction do not necessarily lead to political support for another government over one's own—and where they do, they may encourage migration rather than political protest.

To support Russian political and foreign policy objectives over those of the government of the country in which they reside, Russian compatriots likely must be both socially alienated and determined to remain within those societies rather than return to Russia. In countries such as Estonia and Latvia, economic satisfaction may have combined with a continuing cultural gulf to create a pool of compatriots who support Russian objectives without desiring to leave their country of residence. A similar pool of Russia supporters has emerged in eastern Ukraine, as a result of cultural affinity with Russia and dissatisfaction with Ukrainian government policies. In this case, Russian compatriots appear determined to remain in territory with a deep historical connection to Russia.

Finally, it may be the case that individuals simultaneously adopt multiple overlapping identities—state-centric, ethno-centric, linguistic, political, or otherwise. Or they may adopt particular identities in particular circumstances, e.g., when at home, traveling, or visiting a government office.

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<sup>31</sup> Joshua Kucera, "North Kazakhstan isn't the next Crimea - yet," *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/>.

<sup>32</sup> Peyrouse, *Russian Minority in Central Asia*; Farangis Najibullah, "Putin Downplays Kazakh Independence, Sparks Angry Reaction," RFE/RL, 3 September 2014. <http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-putin-history-reaction-nation/26565141.html>.

# Russia's Foreign Policy Objectives and Russian Compatriots Abroad

As with any state, much less any self-identified great power, Russia's immediate neighborhood is fundamental to its foreign policy and national security priorities. Since Russian compatriots abroad reside predominantly in this region, Russia's policy toward the former Soviet Union (the "near abroad") and its place in Russia's overall foreign policy is essential context for Moscow's approach to compatriots.

## Russia's foreign policy

Chief among Vladimir Putin's goals for Russia is to establish Russia as an acknowledged global great power, an aim with direct implications for Russia's attitude toward the Eurasian region. In a private meeting several years ago, a senior Kremlin official described this status as being "a member of the world's board of governors"—one of the small number of countries that are sufficiently powerful to pursue what Russians call an "independent" or "sovereign" foreign policy. In essence, these terms refer to a foreign policy that is not subordinate to a senior ally or partner or, alternatively, dictated by military and economic weakness. This attitude is in no small part a reaction against Russia's political weakness and economic dependence on the United States and the West in the 1990s.

Obtaining global great power status requires security, stability, and significant influence along the aspiring power's periphery; absent this, national leaders can devote neither the time nor the attention necessary to establish and sustain a global role.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Moscow's quest for such a role inherently requires a considerable if not preeminent capability to shape Russia's immediate neighborhood. Indeed, Russia's National Security Strategy declares its relationships with the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as "a priority direction" of the country's

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<sup>33</sup> Russia's recent intervention in Syria notably occurred during a period of relative calm in the conflict in eastern Ukraine; whether Moscow could have moved so assertively in Syria while intense fighting was underway in Ukraine is an open question.

foreign policy and separately draws attention to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as “the principal inter-state instrument designed to stand against regional challenges and threats of a military-political and military-strategic character.”<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov (the minister of foreign affairs), and other top officials regularly refer to the potential spillover effects of regional instability, especially terrorism and drug trafficking.<sup>35</sup> This illustrates the region’s importance to Russia’s leaders.

More recently, Moscow has intervened in Syria’s civil war not simply to support President Bashar al-Assad’s government, but to prevent a victory by the Islamic State or other extremist forces that could lead experienced fighters from the former Soviet region to return to their home countries and foment violence in Russia or along its southern periphery. Russian officials see particular danger in their country’s North Caucasus region, including (but not limited to) Chechnya.

## Security and stability

The Russian government defines security along its borders as a top priority.<sup>36</sup> However, Russian officials generally define *security* and *stability* differently from their Western counterparts. For Moscow, security in the former Soviet region rests heavily on friendly governments that will not challenge its leadership or align themselves with outside powers. This is why Russian officials have typically had a very skeptical view of Western assurances that NATO enlargement would increase Russia’s security.

At the same time, Russian officials see strong governments as essential in stemming the spread of extremism and terrorism—especially along Russia’s southern periphery. Russia’s government is not inherently opposed to democracy, and, indeed,

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<sup>34</sup> СТРАТЕГИЯ национальной безопасности Российской Федерации до 2020 года, May 12, 2009, <http://www.archive.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/e2f289bea62097f9c325787a0034c255/8abb3c17eb3d2626c32575b500320ae4!OpenDocument>.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Lavrov referred to Afghanistan’s drug trade generating income for terrorists in other countries in opening remarks at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Ufa, in July 2015. See [http://in.sputniknews.com/south\\_asia/20150604/1014704526.html](http://in.sputniknews.com/south_asia/20150604/1014704526.html).

<sup>36</sup> This is evident in documents such as Russia’s Military Doctrine, last revised in 2014, which describes NATO’s “military build-up” and the “approach of NATO member-states’ military infrastructure to the Russian Federation’s borders” first among the “military dangers” to Russia. (Notably, the Military Doctrine defines a *military danger* as a situation that could “under certain circumstances” produce a “military threat,” which is “characterized by the real possibility of the beginning of military conflict.”) Военная доктрина Российской Федерации, December 25, 2014, <http://www.archive.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/e2f289bea62097f9c325787a0034c255/2a959a74cd7ed01f432569fb004872a3!OpenDocument>.

has sought to promote it when it has aligned with Russia's other interests, such as in Afghanistan, where democracy's protection of minority rights could be important to Moscow's long-term friends in the Northern Alliance. However, top officials see *transitions* to democracy—particularly abrupt transitions, such as the “color revolutions” in Russia's neighborhood—as producing dangerous instability that is often best avoided.

President Putin described this thinking in his 2013 Address to the Federal Assembly:

...in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state.

In recent years, we have seen how attempts to push supposedly more progressive development models onto other nations actually resulted in regression, barbarity and extensive bloodshed. This happened in many Middle Eastern and North African countries.<sup>37</sup>

Putin's reference to “supposedly more progressive development models” is a clear jab at U.S. democracy promotion efforts throughout the region and makes clear his view that it has produced instability rather than stability.

## Russia's policy toward Russian compatriots

Top Russian officials have consistently described protecting Russian compatriots as a foreign policy objective for over two decades—virtually Russia's entire post-independence history. Former president Boris Yeltsin issued what appeared to be his first government-wide instructions on the matter in an August 1994 decree, “On the Fundamental Directions of State Policy of the Russian Federation in relation to Compatriots Living Abroad,” which established an inter-agency coordinating commission and ordered the government to review and approve a list of “priority measures” to support Russian compatriots.<sup>38</sup> As Yeltsin's tenure drew to a close, Russia's legislature passed the Federal Law “On State Policy of the Russian Federation in relation to Compatriots Living Abroad,” which legally defined Russian compatriots

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<sup>37</sup> Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, December 12, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.

<sup>38</sup> Указ Президента от 11 августа 1994 года № 1681 «Об основных направлениях государственной политики Российской Федерации в отношении соотечественников, проживающих за рубежом», at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/6801>.

and stated Russia's commitment to protecting their rights. The law defines these rights as including the rights:

- to use the Russian language (or "other native languages of peoples of the Russian Federation"),
- to exercise cultural autonomy and to create social, religious, and media organizations,
- to participate in non-governmental organizations at the national and international levels,
- to contribute to "mutually advantageous relations" between Russia and their states of residence,
- to maintain connections among themselves and to Russia, and to obtain information from Russia, and
- to choose freely whether to remain where they live or return to Russia.<sup>39</sup>

The Russian government's foundational foreign policy documents have reflected its attention to compatriots. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, a document prepared periodically by the Foreign Ministry for approval by the president and released when new presidents enter office, highlighted the rights of Russian compatriots in its 2000, 2008, and 2013 editions.<sup>40</sup> While the language varies slightly over time, the Foreign Policy Concept consistently refers to "comprehensive protection of the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad." (The 2008 and 2013 versions refer to "legitimate interests.") Interestingly, neither Russia's National Security Strategy (2009) nor its earlier National Security Concept (2000) refer to "compatriots"; they call strictly for protecting the "rights and lawful interests of Russian citizens abroad"—a narrower construction.<sup>41</sup> Russia is currently revising its National Security Strategy.

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<sup>39</sup> ФЕДЕРАЛЬНЫЙ ЗАКОН "О ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ В ОТНОШЕНИИ СООТЕЧЕСТВЕННИКОВ ЗА РУБЕЖОМ," <http://archive.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-dgpch.nsf/1a268548523257ccc325726f00357db3/8440d36903c217a4c3257776003a73f5!OpenDocument>

<sup>40</sup> "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2000)" in Igor Ivanov, *The New Russian Diplomacy* (The Nixon Center and Brookings Institution Press, 2000); 2008 release at <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>; and 2013 release at [http://archive.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D](http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D).

<sup>41</sup> National Security Concept of the Russian Federation (2000), <http://archive.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/36aba64ac09f737fc32575d9002bbf31!Open>



Russian president Vladimir Putin has personally referred to Russian compatriots on many occasions. Indeed, one of his most widely cited statements—his description of the Soviet Union’s collapse as a “geopolitical disaster”—was connected to a lament that “tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory” after the USSR disintegrated.<sup>42</sup> Mr. Putin formulated this thought much more starkly in his March 2014 address to a joint session of parliament calling for Crimea’s incorporation into the Russian Federation, saying, “It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it was not simply robbed, it was plundered.” He continued, “Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.”<sup>43</sup>

While Russia’s formal policy documents tend to emphasize cooperation with regional governments in protecting Russian compatriots, and avoid Putin’s emotionally charged language, the Russian president’s statements are generally consistent with formal policy. Indeed, Putin clarified his past statement that the Soviet collapse was a geo-political disaster by saying that “those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart, and those that do regret it have no brain.”<sup>44</sup>

## Resettlement and Russia’s demographics

Over the last two decades, a considerable share of the Russian compatriots who awoke in different countries after the USSR’s collapse have resettled to Russia, with the Russian government’s help. The migration of Russian compatriots to Russia has been important to Russia’s demographics, especially during the 1990s, when immigration into Russia from other CIS countries was at its highest levels. From 1993 to 1999, immigration into Russia totaled nearly 5 million people, of which over 3 million were ethnic Russians, according to data from the Federal Service on State Statistics, which were reported in a major study by the Institute for Socio-Political Research under the Russian Academy of Sciences and Moscow State University’s

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Document; СТРАТЕГИЯ национальной безопасности Российской Федерации до 2020 года, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Vladimir Putin, Address to the Federal Assembly, April 25, 2005, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031\\_type70029type82912\\_87086.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml).

<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with German Television Channels ARD and ZDF, May 5, 2005, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/05/05/2355\\_type82912type82916\\_87597.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/05/05/2355_type82912type82916_87597.shtml).

Higher School of Contemporary Social Research.<sup>45</sup> Taking into account that Russia's total population declined by about 2 million during this period—even with these 5 million immigrants—their return prevented what could have been a 5% decline in Russia's population, an unprecedented demographic collapse in peacetime.<sup>46</sup>

Moscow has supported the resettlement of Russian compatriots in the Russian Federation, including through a government commission, the Interdepartmental Commission for the Implementation of the National Program to Assist the Voluntary Resettlement in Russia of Compatriots Currently Living Abroad.<sup>47</sup> This remains important to Russia's demographics today; according to a recent report, Russia's population would have declined in the first half of 2015 if not for migration into the country.<sup>48</sup>

## Russia's use of Russian compatriots

Russia's formal policy toward Russian compatriots is oriented toward helping them improve living conditions where they reside or, alternatively, resettle to Russia. From this perspective, compatriots are objects of Russian policy—i.e., the Russian government pursues policies intended to affect them in various ways.

Yet, Russia's practical policy toward its compatriots abroad also appears to approach them as instruments—in other words, as tools to implement broader policies that may affect compatriots but are not primarily for their benefit. In fact, the substantial numbers of Russian compatriots who remain in neighboring countries can serve as instruments of Russia's foreign policy in several ways.

- Sizable Russian compatriot communities sustain the idea of a cultural “Russian world” larger than Russia itself. This maintains pride in the country's imperial and Soviet past while simultaneously demonstrating that Russia is a great power with social and cultural influence beyond its borders. Russia's *Russkiy*

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<sup>45</sup> At well over 200 pages, the 2014 report's title translates to “‘Ours’ Abroad.” It is a major assessment of Russians, Russian speakers, non-Russian ethnic groups of the Russian Federation, and compatriots in other countries, their integration there, and their return migration to Russia. Its introductory section describes Russia's diaspora as second in size only to China's. <http://www.ryazantsev.org/book1-1.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Official statistics are available in English at [http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b14\\_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d01/05-01.htm](http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b14_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d01/05-01.htm).

<sup>47</sup> For a brief description, see the Kremlin web site, <http://en.kremlin.ru/structure/commissions#institution-4>.

<sup>48</sup> “Население России за I полугодие выросло почти на 50 тыс. человек,” Interfax, August 19, 2015, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/461277>.

*Mir* (“Russian World”) Foundation plays a leading role in this area, promoting Russian language education and Russian culture.<sup>49</sup> Following across-the-board government cuts, *Russky Mir*’s 2015 budget is 427.5 million rubles, though some aspire to increase its annual funding to 750 million rubles by 2018.<sup>50</sup>

- To the extent that Moscow is successful in aligning compatriots’ cultural and political identification with Russia rather than with their countries of residence, the Russian government can cultivate existing mistrust to further alienate compatriot populations from their home governments. Russian officials can use this alienation immediately or allow it to remain latent, as a resource for the future. In practice, alienation can take place at multiple levels, including particular individuals, non-governmental organizations representing compatriots, and even regional governments within states.
- Integrated Russian compatriots can serve as an invaluable intelligence resource, providing information about military capabilities, trade, financial and economic policy, and internal politics in neighboring states. This has been most obvious in Ukraine, including in Ukraine’s military and security services. In a speech to students at a Ukrainian university, President Petro Poroshenko personally claimed that about 80% of the personnel in his country’s security services (SBU) had been suborned by Moscow.<sup>51</sup> While perhaps an exaggeration, many media reports describe compromised SBU operations.<sup>52</sup>
- Proportionately large Russian compatriot populations can have significant political influence in their countries of residence. In Latvia, the ethnic Russian politician Nils Ušakovs has served as mayor of Riga since 2009; his party won approximately 22% of the vote during 2014 elections—despite Russia’s actions in Ukraine, which boosted turnout among parties taking a harder line toward Moscow.<sup>53</sup> A victory would have made Ušakovs the leading candidate for prime minister.

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<sup>49</sup> Web site: <http://ruskiymir.ru/en/>.

<sup>50</sup> Виктор Хамраев, Минобрнауки нужны деньги на «Русский мир», *Коммерсант*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2753934>.

<sup>51</sup> “Ukraine’s Poroshenko Says 80% of Security Officials Were Russian Spies in 2012 — Report,” *Moscow Times*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/ukraine-s-poroshenko-says-80-of-security-officials-were-russian-spies-in-2012-report/518151.html>.

<sup>52</sup> For example, see Philip Shishkin, “How Russian Spy Games Are Sabotaging Ukraine’s Intelligence Agency,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-spy-games-are-sabotaging-ukraines-intelligence-agency-1426127401>.

<sup>53</sup> From Latvia’s Central Election Commission: <http://sv2014.cvk.lv/?lang=1>. The name of Ušakovs’ party is Harmony or Concord in English; it is VIENOTĪBA in Latvian.

- Protecting the human rights of Russian compatriots is an attractive diplomatic/public affairs opportunity for Moscow that allows the Russian government to position itself favorably in international media, particularly when international or European institutions also defend ethnic Russians or Russian speakers living in other countries. A recent statement from Russia's Foreign Ministry commenting on UN Human Rights Committee recommendations to the Latvian government illustrates this.<sup>54</sup>
- Finally, of course, protecting Russian compatriots can serve to justify assertive Russian actions, such as the seizure of Crimea. As in the case of the so-called "little green men" who surrounded the Crimean parliament building as Russia's intervention began, the presence of Russian compatriots can also serve to camouflage Moscow's involvement.

## Compatriots and political legitimacy

In addition to its foreign policy dimensions, visibly defending ethnic Russian populations is politically advantageous for Russian political leaders. Perhaps most notable in this respect has been Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who launched his political career in the 1990s as a leader of the Congress of Russian Communities, a party explicitly dedicated to this cause. (Rogozin allied himself with General Alexander Lebed, who won prominence as the commander of Russia's 14<sup>th</sup> Army in Moldova's separatist Transnistria region.) Former Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov was similarly known for his long public campaign to return Crimea to Russia and (until banned by Kiev) his frequent visits there.

The Russian public sees Russia's neighborhood as an area important to the country's national interests and national identity. As a result, Russians expect leaders to manage relationships successfully, meaning primarily on Moscow's terms, both as a matter of necessity and as a matter of dignity and pride. Apparent defeats or concessions can be politically damaging, while victories—such as Mr. Putin's seizure of Crimea—provide not merely support but also political legitimacy. Putin's approval

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<sup>54</sup> Comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the reaction of Latvia to the recommendation of the UN Human Rights Committee, April 5, 2014, [http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/lv/-/asset\\_publisher/9RJVTExfWg7R/content/id/67038](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/lv/-/asset_publisher/9RJVTExfWg7R/content/id/67038).

rating in respected Levada Center polls increased from 69% in February 2014 to 80% in March, when Russia annexed Crimea, and has remained above 80% since then.<sup>55</sup>

Developments in surrounding nations can also strengthen or weaken the Russian leadership's political legitimacy. With some justification, Russians see their country as much more stable and prosperous than many if not most other CIS countries—something that makes Russia's leaders look successful and deserving of support. This is especially consequential with respect to Ukraine, which is the largest and most similar country in the region and therefore the most directly comparable to Russia. A democratic Ukraine with a stable political system and a growing economy would, over time, raise questions about why Russia was not more successful itself. Given their common language, easy travel, and shared media, this could even transform Ukraine's large compatriot population from an instrument of Russia's influence over Ukraine into an instrument of Western/Ukrainian influence in Russia. Such domestic political impacts are a key consideration for Russia's leadership.

The critical challenge for U.S. and Western policy-makers is of course to understand how and when Moscow may seek either to act on behalf of Russian compatriots or to employ them in pursuing its broader objectives. This requires an assessment of Russia's strategic calculus, to which we now turn.

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<sup>55</sup> Levada-Center, Indexes, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/indexes-0>. Yet, while approval for Putin remains at 83% in August 2015, only 55% of Russians responded that their country "is on the right track" during the same month.

# Compatriots' Role in Russia's Strategic Calculus

We define *strategic calculus* as the calculations that shape leadership's strategic choices. Strategic calculus incorporates drivers, which motivate action, boundaries, which limit it,, and the decision-making processes through which leaders assess options. Thus, strategic calculus incorporates identifying goals and the steps to achieve them, assessing policies that other actors might pursue in response, and determining how to address those potential responses. This inherently requires political judgments both internally and externally. Strategic calculus is the foundation of realistic and rational policy-making.

The Russian leadership's strategic calculus can be challenging to understand because Russia's decision-making processes are personalized and non-transparent. Nevertheless, observers have amassed over 15 years' empirical experience with Vladimir Putin's rhetoric, choices, and actions as well as with broader patterns inside the Russian government under his leadership. Thus, they can make a meaningful if cautious assessment of Moscow's basic approach to foreign and national security policy, including its policy toward compatriots. With this caveat, we are confident in our assessment of the Russian leadership's strategic calculus in formulating policy toward its compatriots abroad.

## Drivers

The key drivers in Russia's strategic calculus relating to Russian compatriots reflect the fact that Moscow's foreign policy toward Russian compatriots is largely a function of its overall regional objectives. We see five broad drivers:

- **Geopolitical.** As argued earlier, Russia's desire for influence in the former Soviet region is a function of its quest for acknowledged global great power status. Moscow thus prefers that governments in this region are both relatively friendly (or at least not hostile) and relatively deferential. Russian compatriots can both influence and pressure governments to pursue friendly policies.
- **Security.** Russia's seeks to maintain its modest network of regional military bases and generally to exclude other extra-regional states from establishing

military bases in the region. In Crimea, securing the Sevastopol naval base was a key Russian objective and the relatively large military presence permitted at the base (far larger than any other base outside Russia) was decisive in doing so. Some of Russia's bases (e.g., early-warning radar stations) are strategy oriented. Others play a regional security role—such as the bases in Tajikistan that host the 201<sup>st</sup> Motor Rifle Division, which had a significant role in the country's 1992 civil war. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army has been the facilitator and guarantor of Transnistria's de facto independence from Moldova. Russia's peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia were of course central in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. Conversely, after initially accepting American military bases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to support the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Moscow later encouraged their governments to discontinue those arrangements and offered financial incentives.

- **Economic.** Russia has important interests at stake in its economic ties with other successor states of the former USSR, particularly with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, which together amounted to nearly 15% of Russia's exports in 2012. (The remaining CIS countries total to under 2%, and the three Baltic States combine to about 3%.)<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the Kremlin's initial objections to the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement were related to its potential economic impacts. Russian compatriots can play central roles in sustaining these economic relationships.
- **Political.** In addition to its broad geopolitical aims, Russia has narrower political goals in regional states. Russian compatriots can play political roles and help reach those goals. For example, they can influence the success of specific legislative initiatives that could affect either Russian compatriot communities or the Russian government's interests, such as constitutional or legal reforms in Ukraine to promote political decentralization.
- **Humanitarian.** As described earlier, Russia's government conducts a variety of programs to assist Russian compatriots, including promoting language and culture, human rights, and resettlement.

## Geographic priorities

These drivers are most consequential in Ukraine. It is the largest of the post-Soviet states; it adjoins Russia's European heartland; it has been a key trade and investment partner (including for some military production) and is important to Russia's goals

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<sup>56</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology Observatory of Economic Complexity, [https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/explore/tree\\_map/hs/export/rus/show/all/2012/](https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/explore/tree_map/hs/export/rus/show/all/2012/).

for a regional trade bloc; and it has deep cultural and historical ties (including many historical sites). Belarus is important for some of the same reasons. If Belarus president Alexander Lukashenko were to seek to re-orient his country toward the West, Moscow would likely perceive a threat to its vital interests.

Of the former Soviet republics, Russia also shares land borders with the three Baltic States (although Lithuania abuts the Kaliningrad enclave rather than Russia proper), and with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. These states are thus most significant to Russia's national security: a hostile military presence—or internal instability—in any of them could reach Russian territory directly. Kazakhstan is also economically important to Russia, and it, Estonia, and Latvia have proportionately large compatriot populations (near or exceeding 25%).

U.S. and other Western analysis has generally focused on the proportional size of Russian and compatriot communities relative to a country's overall population as an indicator of potential instability or of Russian influence. However, it is also useful to consider the absolute size of these communities, as numerically larger communities give Russia a greater stake in any conflict or instability that could threaten these groups. Numerically, the largest ethnic Russian populations are in Ukraine (approximately 7.5 million), Kazakhstan (approximately 4.3 million), Uzbekistan (approximately 1.6 million), and Belarus (approximately 800,000).<sup>57</sup> From this perspective, Kazakhstan's Russian compatriot community may well equal or exceed the combined total of all the other post-Soviet states excluding Russia and Ukraine. For that matter, Ukraine's total is comparable to that of the 13 other former Soviet states, excluding Russia, combined.

Thus far, neither Kazakhstan nor Azerbaijan has sought to challenge important Russian interests; indeed, both have maintained generally positive relations with Moscow. At the same time, each has a strong leader prepared to contain domestic threats, including radical Islamists. Should either condition change, however, Russia could see a very significant threat to its interests and to Russian compatriots, particularly in Kazakhstan.<sup>58</sup> Notably, while Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev successfully inherited political power from his father, Kazakhstan's aging leader Nursultan Nazarbayev remains in office, having just won re-election at age 75. Since

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<sup>57</sup> Authors' calculations from *CIA World Factbook* population data. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/>. Next largest are Turkmenistan (approximately 627,000), Latvia (approximately 520,000), Kyrgyzstan (approximately 436,000) and Estonia (approximately 313,000). Numbers of Russian compatriots are larger, to varying degrees, as this incorporates Russian-speakers and other Russian Federation nationalities.

<sup>58</sup> Based on the authors' calculations using *CIA World Factbook* data, Azerbaijan's ethnic Russian population is about 127,000—one-fortieth of Kazakhstan's.



geography also makes Kazakhstan pivotal to Russia's wider role in Central Asia, and the country has the second-largest Russian compatriot population after Ukraine, its eventual stable transition and continued friendly orientation will be critical to Russia.

While they share borders with Russia, the Baltic States, as NATO members, are in a different category from other post-Soviet states, and Moscow no longer contests their strategic alignment. Due to their NATO membership, Russian military intervention in the Baltic States could carry substantially higher—and more unpredictable—costs for Moscow than elsewhere. Nevertheless, Russia has exercised sustained military, economic, and diplomatic pressure on the Baltic States and used unconventional tactics such as cyber-attacks. Moscow could see large-scale NATO deployments there as a significant threat to bases in its Western Military District; the concern that it might do so has, of course, already constrained NATO responses to Russia's actions in Ukraine. In view of the high stakes, Russia seems unlikely to risk a serious conflict in the current environment. Still, this calculation could change if Moscow were to assess that the existing danger is already so great that its own responses would not materially alter the threats facing Russia or, alternatively, if Russian leaders believed that dramatic action could force the West to back down. Again, Russian compatriots could serve as an instrument of action or as justification for action.

Armenia is an important strategic partner for Moscow, but is unlikely to generate threats to Russian interests in the near term. It was a largely willing addition to the tsarist empire as it was seeking protection from its neighbors, and its leaders see similar reasons to align with Russia today. In Moldova, Russia accepts the status quo in Transnistria, but could react strongly to any effort to change it; the separatist region's Russian compatriots have long been a highly visible political issue in Russia, to a degree matched only by compatriots in Ukraine and the Baltic States.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are most significant to Russia's security (particularly with respect to terrorism and drug trafficking) and to its efforts to exert political influence in the region (including by discouraging an ongoing U.S. military presence). Russian compatriot populations there are relatively small—as are Russia's enduring economic interests. Moreover, while Russian troops played a significant part in the Tajik civil war over 20 years ago, Moscow declined to become involved in Kyrgyzstan's more recent Tulip Revolution despite some calls to do so. Afghanistan is important to Russia in large part because of its impact on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. From a cost-benefit perspective, supporting strong governments that contain extremism in this region helps Moscow avoid pressure to intervene militarily if a weaker government should fall.

## Boundaries on Russian policy

### Conservative foreign policy

The most significant boundary on Russian policy toward Russian compatriots—and toward the former Soviet region—is Russia’s fundamentally conservative foreign policy. Notwithstanding increasing assertiveness during Vladimir Putin’s tenure as Russia’s president, Russia’s overall foreign policy has been conservative and strategically defensive. That some of Moscow’s individual actions have been offensive is not a contradiction: from the Russian government’s perspective, Russia has generally taken these steps to prevent, halt, or resist perceived challenges or threats—particularly in its immediate neighborhood. This includes Russia’s intervention in Syria, where Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that Moscow must fight to prevent the return of over 2,000 militants to the former Soviet region—many of whom are Russian Federation citizens (or, indeed, Russian compatriots under Russia’s expansive official definition).<sup>59</sup>

In many respects, Putin appears to see himself (and Russia) as a conservative defender of the status quo—not dissimilar from Russia’s tsars, who aligned themselves with other monarchies against revolutionary France and later with Britain and France to contain Germany’s growing power on the eve of World War I. Putin’s well-known 2007 Address to the Munich Conference on Security Policy, largely a denunciation of unilateral U.S. military action as producing rather than containing instability, was one of his earliest comprehensive formulations of this approach.<sup>60</sup> His 2013 Address to the Federal Assembly, in which he quoted Orthodox-conservative philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, was one of his most specific efforts to define himself and Russia as leaders of the world’s political and social conservatives.<sup>61</sup> Still, Putin has been careful to make clear that he does not view tsarist Russia as a model, saying that “proponents of fundamental conservatism who idealize pre-1917 Russia seem to be similarly far from reality, as are supporters of an extreme, Western-style liberalism.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> <http://tass.ru/en/politics/824031>

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>

<sup>61</sup> Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, December 12, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.

<sup>62</sup> Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, September 19, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>.

From Putin's perspective, Russia's principal post-Soviet military operations have been fundamentally defensive. Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, ordered two wars in Chechnya, the first to prevent its secession (which many in Russia saw as the domino that could collapse the country) and the second to contain quasi-independent Chechnya's dangerous impacts on Russia's other North Caucasus regions. Medvedev and Putin intervened in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to prevent Mikheil Saakashvili, then president of Georgia, from forcibly reintegrating the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—and to block Georgia's possible NATO membership for the foreseeable future.

Similarly, from Putin's point of view, his seizure of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine were in defense of Russia's national interests. The moves blocked Ukraine's membership in NATO and ended continuous risks to Russia's control over its naval base at Sevastopol. They also protected Putin from the domestic consequences of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich's ouster, which otherwise could have looked like a major foreign policy defeat.

If Crimea's reintegration into Russia had been a central goal of Vladimir Putin's foreign policy without regard to conditions in Ukraine, Russia could have acted at almost any time over the last decade. The Crimean parliament had voted more than once for greater autonomy and even independence from Ukraine well before March 2014. Russia's parliament had also voted, among other things, to declare Sevastopol a Russian city.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, leading Russian politicians had been campaigning for years to encourage the Russian government to take back Crimea, and had been attempting to mobilize Russian compatriots there.<sup>64</sup>

Generally speaking, Russia's strategically defensive foreign policy suggests that Moscow is unlikely to pursue a Crimea-style policy, or a Donbas-style policy, toward other Russian compatriot populations unless Russia's leaders—especially Vladimir Putin—perceive significant new threats to Russia's regional role and influence in specific countries. It is especially unlikely to pursue such policies if the potential costs seem high. Indeed, Russia declined to intervene during Kyrgyzstan's "Tulip Revolution" and during Georgia's earlier "Rose Revolution" (when shared frustration with former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze allowed a degree of cooperation between Washington and Moscow). That said, in any new crisis Russian

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<sup>63</sup> Serge Schmemmann, "Russian Parliament Votes a Claim to Ukrainian Port of Sevastopol," *New York Times*, July 10, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/10/world/russian-parliament-votes-a-claim-to-ukrainian-port-of-sevastopol.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Clifford J. Levy, "Moscow Mayor Exports Russia's New Nationalism," *New York Times*, October 25, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/26/world/europe/26mayor.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/26/world/europe/26mayor.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

compatriots may prove attractive to Moscow as both a justification for action and an instrument of policy.

## Russia's financial constraints

Financial boundaries are also significant in Russia's strategic calculus, particularly as its economy and (even more so) its federal budget groan under the strain of continuing low oil prices that have forced across-the-board cuts in non-defense spending.

Moscow (along with many Russians) already appears to have blanched at the cost of sustaining and rebuilding rebel-held territories in Ukraine, the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. When Kiev cut off natural gas supplies to the two regions during winter 2015, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said that Gazprom would provide the gas on "commercial terms" (i.e., not as humanitarian assistance).<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in the weeks following Crimea's annexation, Putin assertively reassured Russians that the costs of integrating it into Russia would not force reductions in Russia's social safety net. "Not a single social program adopted by Russia and funded out of the Russian budget will be reduced," he declared.<sup>66</sup> Putin likewise insisted that Crimea's tourist destinations would not threaten Sochi's future as a high-priced resort.<sup>67</sup> The fact that Russia's president and his advisors chose to address these two questions in a live national television program suggests that they considered it important to do so.

Since that time, Russian federal budget outlays to integrate Crimea and develop its infrastructure have only increased. According to Deputy Crimean Affairs Minister Andrey Sokolov, Russia will spend \$2.2 billion in 2015 and a total of \$13.6 billion by 2020 to do so. "This is a huge sum comparable with expenses on the Olympic Games in Sochi, and more than the funds spent to prepare Vladivostok for the APEC summit," he said.<sup>68</sup> In Russia's current economic environment, neither Vladimir Putin nor other Russian leaders are likely eager to assume financial responsibility for devastated rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine, which would far exceed the costs of absorbing an undamaged Crimea. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union,

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<sup>65</sup> "PM Medvedev orders commencement of gas deliveries to embattled Donbas," February 19, 2015, <http://www.rt.com/politics/233743-russia-ukraine-heating-medvedev/>.

<sup>66</sup> "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," April 17, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> "Russia's federal budget to spend \$2.2 billion on Crimea's modernization in 2015," TASS, April 18, 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/russia/790315>.

many Russians were skeptical toward subsidizing Soviet bloc governments and the USSR's other Union Republics, now independent states.<sup>69</sup>

## The Afghan syndrome

A third significant boundary on Moscow's strategic calculus is Russia's so-called "Afghan syndrome"—the public's reluctance to support military operations after the Soviet Union's long and troubled efforts to occupy and stabilize Afghanistan. This reluctance to support military action was especially evident during Russia's first war in Chechnya, when the country's freer political and media environments under President Boris Yeltsin permitted open opposition. This was especially important in that the war in Chechnya was not an optional foreign venture but a (flawed) effort to preserve Russia's territorial integrity. A spring 1996 poll by Russia's independent Levada polling agency found that some 59% of Russians expected the candidate for whom they planned to vote in forthcoming presidential elections to end the war in Chechnya.<sup>70</sup> As late as 2013, after the second war in Chechnya and a time when Russia's North Caucasus region was much more stable, some 24% of Russians expressed support for Chechnya's independence.<sup>71</sup>

During the second war in Chechnya, new president Vladimir Putin expended significant effort in controlling media access to and reporting about the conflict and in suppressing public criticism of the war. This was likely a direct consequence of the fact that public pressure forced Yeltsin to accept Chechnya's de facto independence to end the first war—an outcome Putin was unwilling to accept.

Although the Russian government's ability to manage information has improved since that time, it remains limited; as a result, the prospect of significant casualties does shape Russia's strategic choices. At the same time, however, like in Western democracies, public tolerance of casualties is proportionate to public perceptions of the stakes—hence, the efforts to magnify perceived threats in Ukraine.

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Dobbs, "Oil Subsidies Stir Russian Nationalism," *Washington Post*, May 29, 1990, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/05/29/oil-subsidies-stir-russian-nationalism/7089ae92-2bcc-4ec6-8c79-5791898c6298/>.

<sup>70</sup> "Russian Public Opinion 2012-2013," [http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/2012\\_eng.pdf](http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/2012_eng.pdf), p. 107.

<sup>71</sup> "Quarter of Russians Favor Independence for Chechnya—Poll," Sputnik, July 1, 2013, <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20130701/181990953/Quarter-of-Russians-Favor-Independence-for-Chechnya-Poll.html>.

## Russia's decision-making

While Russian president Vladimir Putin has very considerable authority in defining Russia's foreign policy, he does not make decisions in a vacuum. On the contrary, Russia's president operates within the context of Russia's elite-level policy debates and within a broader political-bureaucratic system that overlays Putin's personal style and approaches onto Russian and Soviet historical patterns.

## Russia's foreign policy debate

Though Russian officials typically do not differ publicly with their president, they do express opinions that suggest the existence of two broad schools of thought regarding Russia's foreign policy, with implications for Russia's approach to its neighborhood and to Russian compatriots.

Russia's Foreign Ministry and some other voices describe a "multi-vector" foreign policy approach that emphasizes relations with China, India, and multilateral organizations such as the BRICS group, which includes Brazil, China, India and South Africa as well as Russia, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in addition to Russia's ties with the United States and the West.<sup>72</sup> Succeeding at this policy—intended to facilitate Russia's role as a great power and a stable international environment for domestic economic growth—inherently requires reorienting toward China while preventing a fundamental break with the West that would entirely redirect Moscow's foreign policy.

Those with this perspective advocate cooperating with Washington in some areas, such as the U.S. and NATO war in Afghanistan and the recent Iran nuclear agreement, notwithstanding differences in others, such as Ukraine and Syria. They argue for continued efforts to find a diplomatic resolution to Russian-Western differences over Ukraine and have relatively limited objectives in Ukraine, with particular emphasis on preventing Ukraine's NATO membership and encouraging decentralization in order to provide Russian compatriot populations with more political and language rights. While determined that Russia should play a leading role in the former Soviet region, they generally eschew tactics that could seriously damage Moscow's relations with other major powers. They seek to assist Russian compatriots through established diplomatic and institutional channels, e.g., with legal complaints in international

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<sup>72</sup> Sergey Lavrov, "Lavrov explains the country's foreign policy," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, April 4, 2013, [http://rbth.com/opinion/2013/04/04/lavrov\\_explains\\_the\\_countrys\\_foreign\\_policy\\_philosophy\\_24649.html](http://rbth.com/opinion/2013/04/04/lavrov_explains_the_countrys_foreign_policy_philosophy_24649.html).

institutions, regular public statements, and assistance from organizations such as *Rossotrudnichestvo* and *Russky Mir*.

Harder-line officials, including some in Putin's inner circle, are deeply skeptical of American intentions and focus on building a closer relationship with China in order to challenge the U.S.-led international order. They appear to support a confrontational policy toward the United States and to argue that Russian escalation in Ukraine will demonstrate Western weakness and secure a favorable resolution for Moscow, whereas continued cooperation in other areas will encourage Washington and Brussels to believe that Russia is weak. They are quite comfortable applying significant pressure on other former Soviet states in order to achieve Russian foreign policy objectives. One example is then first deputy prime minister Sergey Ivanov's reported support for economic sanctions against Estonia in a 2007 dispute over Soviet-era monuments. Some, such as Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, have long records of activism on behalf of Russian compatriots in the former Soviet Union, especially in Moldova's Transnistria region.<sup>73</sup>

Thus far, Vladimir Putin has set Russian policy on the course advocated by the Foreign Ministry, expanding Russia's ties with China and other non-Western powers while attempting to preserve some cooperation with the United States and major European governments. This constrains further provocative actions toward Russian compatriots in the former Soviet region, at least in the near term. Indeed, as Moscow has recently increased its military presence in Syria and pursued military-to-military contacts with the United States, Russia has simultaneously ousted harder-line officials in the Donetsk People's Republic who call for independence rather than greater autonomy within Ukraine.<sup>74</sup>

Vladimir Putin's "inner circle"—primarily current and former *siloviki*, or veterans of Russia's military and security services—appear generally to support "the road not taken," that is, to prefer a more confrontational approach to the United States and the West than Mr. Putin is currently pursuing. That said, since government officials in most political systems rarely express open differences with a sitting head-of-state, this is not easy to assess. Particularly in Russia, Putin has established a clear division of labor in which he establishes strategic goals and policies and he expects his

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<sup>73</sup> For one relatively recent example, see "Russian Deputy PM pledges support to Moldova's breakaway region," RT, July 2, 2014, <http://www.rt.com/politics/169928-rogozin-moldova-transdnier-russia/>.

<sup>74</sup> Owen Matthews, "With Stepped-Up Syrian Intervention, Putin is Playing a Greater Game," *Newsweek*, September 18, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/stepped-syrian-intervention-putin-playing-greater-game-373665>.

subordinates, including his inner circle, to deliver results.<sup>75</sup> This also limits the degree to which the Russian president's close associates publicly express their personal views.

Perhaps more important, however, neither Putin nor key individuals in his inner circle appear to be nationalist ideologues. The Russian president certainly employs nationalist rhetoric, such as in his March 18, 2014, speech to a joint session of the Russian parliament on Crimea's annexation,<sup>76</sup> but he does so intermittently, for practical political purposes. He is a statist and a patriot who asserts that Russia has its own path—neither Western nor Eastern—but he is also extremely pragmatic. This is a common perspective among other *siloviki*<sup>77</sup> that Putin's inner circle seems to share. Observing Russia's actions, the Russian president's close associates indeed appear to be focused more on the pragmatic use of Russian compatriots as operational policy instruments in pursuing wider policy objectives than on addressing the concerns of Russian compatriots themselves.

## The policy process

Because Russia's government does not have a structured and formalized policy process—or, more precisely, because Vladimir Putin's very broad authority in foreign policy limits the impact of formal processes in making specific decisions—Russia's decision-making can appear opaque. That said, available accounts suggest that Russia's president seeks information and receives recommendations from his inner circle, and from other senior subordinates, but does not solicit feedback. As a result, there is little evidence that these individuals openly question his decisions or challenge his thinking, particularly on foreign policy matters.

President Putin's status as the sole decider on any particular issue does not give him the ability to be the sole decider on *every* issue. He can closely manage his personal priorities, but must delegate broad power to subordinates on a de facto basis if not a formal one. Since Russia's government is not immune to internal bureaucratic differences or even disputes, this can lead to simultaneous and contradictory policies that Putin eventually arbitrates. From this perspective, it is important that Mr. Putin appears personally involved in Russia's Ukraine policy. On one hand, Putin's role limits the influence that senior officials such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov are

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<sup>75</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Brookings Institution Press, 2013, p. 230.

<sup>76</sup> "Address by President of the Russian Federation," March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>77</sup> See Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, pp. 34-38.



likely to have over Ukraine policy. On the other hand, to the extent that Ukraine has captured the Russian president's attention, his inner circle and senior government officials may have greater autonomy on some other issues.

## Does Russia have a strategy?

Vladimir Putin's defensive and reactive approach is partially a consequence of the fact that, like Boris Yeltsin, he is more effective as a tactician than as a strategist. This is most evident in that many of the Russian president's tactical moves—including those that appear immediately successful—have uncertain strategic consequences for Russia. This has a variety of important consequences, including the fact that reactive policies can evolve significantly over the course of a crisis, complicating efforts to understand Moscow's objectives and to formulate responses.

The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine is a powerful reflection of Russia's non-strategic approach to foreign policy in many respects.

First, while likely relying on existing contingency plans, Russia's initial seizure of Crimea appears to have been an abrupt response to the collapse of the Viktor Yanukovich presidency and Ukraine's government rather than a step in a considered strategic plan. As Henry Kissinger recently observed, "It is not conceivable that Putin spends 60 billion Euros on turning a summer resort into a winter Olympic village in order to start a military crisis the week after a concluding ceremony that depicted Russia as a part of Western civilization."<sup>78</sup>

Second, the Russian president's decision to encourage and support separatists in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions seems in no small part to have followed from the surprising ease with which Moscow established control in Crimea and the subsequent seizures of government buildings in the two regions. However, the populations in the two eastern provinces were more divided—and less geographically isolated—than Crimea's and those conflicts quickly became more complex.

In that environment, Moscow's active and visible support for the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics has encouraged expectations among Russian compatriots in those regions—and in Russia itself—that the Kremlin cannot fully satisfy without making military and financial commitments that it has thus far demonstrated no willingness to make. At the same time, the more damaging the conflict becomes to the Donbas and its residents, the more Moscow has to deliver in order to maintain its credibility at home and in other Russian compatriot communities.

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<sup>78</sup> "A Conversation with Henry Kissinger," *The National Interest*, September-October 2015, p. 14.

Conversely, Russia's sustained involvement in eastern Ukraine has consolidated anti-Moscow attitudes in the central regions of the country to an extent that senior Russian leaders do not appear to have considered. This may ultimately drive the very changes in Ukraine's orientation that Putin intended to avoid. Removing Crimea's compatriot voters from Ukraine's previously closely divided electorate will likely contribute to these dynamics.

Today, it is unclear how Russia's government can accomplish its stated aims without escalating in ways that it has so far been unprepared to pursue—though Moscow is perhaps not unique in confronting this challenge. Thus far, Vladimir Putin's response has been to prevent the compatriot-separatists' defeat through gradual and calibrated escalation. Yet in the absence of clearly defined objectives, the policy resembles the early stages of former president Lyndon Johnson's escalation in Vietnam.<sup>79</sup> Strategic thinking about Ukraine could have foreseen the possible dynamics of this conflict and the dilemmas they could create.

Russia appears likely to face similar dilemmas in Syria. On one hand, Russia's military presence does not seem sufficient to produce a decisive victory for Syrian government forces on the battlefield. On the other hand, however, Moscow's participation in the conflict subjects both its forces in Syria and civilians in Russia to the risk of retaliatory attacks. Taking into account that only 14% of Russians strongly or somewhat supported a direct military role in Syria in a mid-September 2015 survey—and 69% strongly or somewhat opposed this—a prolonged, costly and inconclusive mission could also pose a political problem.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, Putin's centralized and personalized governance style inherently weakens efforts to establish a system that could develop and execute long-term strategies without his continuous intervention. Russians themselves recognize this and describe the existing approach as one of “manual control” (as opposed to the automatic control that a stronger state system could exercise)<sup>81</sup>. Manual control allows the Russian president the power to do almost anything, but only as long as he personally supervises the effort. Mr. Putin himself recently used the term, asserting

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<sup>79</sup> This is not to imply that Russia might escalate to a similar extent without significant changes in conditions on the ground.

<sup>80</sup> “Война в Сирии: внимание, оценки, ИГИЛ,” Levada Center, September 28, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/28-09-2015/voina-v-sirii-vnimanie-otsenki-igil>.

<sup>81</sup> Though it may appear to be a paradox, an excessively strong individual leader can undermine a government, in that the leader's prerogatives weaken the institutions necessary for a strong “automatic” system. In Russia, the broad autonomy that leaders enjoy at every level—federal, regional, and local—arguably has this impact.

that manual control of the economy might be necessary to respond to the ruble's steep slide in late 2014.<sup>82</sup>

While centralized foreign policy decision-making is hardly unique in Russia's tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet history, Russia's post-Soviet decision-making appears more personalized than in the late Soviet period, when the Communist Party Politburo operated in a more collegial and collective manner. For example, Soviet leaders made the decision to invade Afghanistan during a meeting of the Communist Party Politburo and prepared formal minutes of the meeting.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, long-time Soviet foreign minister Andrey Gromyko appeared to have a more substantial role in policy-making on fundamental issues than Russia's post-Soviet foreign ministers have had.

Notwithstanding a broadly conservative approach, Vladimir Putin has been willing to take considerable risks when he has perceived Russia's fundamental national interests to be at stake. Indeed, according to a recent journalistic account citing a former KGB officer, Putin in his earlier career "was seen in the system as a risk-taker who had little understanding of the consequences of failure"<sup>84</sup>—another indicator suggesting tactical rather than strategic thinking.

Thus, though seizing Crimea was quite bold, Putin reacted to an imminent threat when Viktor Yanukovich fell from power in Ukraine. Ukraine's full membership in the West and its institutions, and its potential ejection of Russia from the naval base at Sevastopol, would have prevented Russia from exercising the role it seeks as a global great power. Russian compatriots served as a justification<sup>85</sup> and as an instrument for Moscow's action, but do not appear to have been the primary motive. Mr. Putin seems to have accurately assessed that the Western reaction to a fait accompli in Crimea would be limited, though the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 over eastern Ukraine led to considerably tougher Western sanctions a few months later. Putin's subsequent statement in a Russian television documentary that he was

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<sup>82</sup> "Putin to meet government to discuss measures to ensure sustainable economic development," January 21, 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/economy/772274>.

<sup>83</sup> See Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, Oxford University Press, 1995. Politburo members excluded staff from the meeting, and a Politburo member prepared handwritten minutes.

<sup>84</sup> Jim Hoagland, "Vladimir Putin, Failed Spy," *Washington Post*, August 7, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/vladimir-putin-failed-spy/2015/08/07/1b51170a-3c72-11e5-b3ac-8a79bc44e5e2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/vladimir-putin-failed-spy/2015/08/07/1b51170a-3c72-11e5-b3ac-8a79bc44e5e2_story.html).

<sup>85</sup> "Ukraine conflict: Putin 'was ready for nuclear alert,'" BBC, March 15, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31899680>.

“ready” to put Russia’s nuclear weapons on alert status implies a calculation that fear of possible nuclear escalation would limit Western military responses.<sup>86</sup>

The 2003 collapse of the Kozak Memorandum, a Russian initiative to resolve the frozen conflict in Transnistria with a federal arrangement providing substantial autonomy to Russian compatriots there, provides an interesting contrary example. When Moldova’s president Vladimir Voronin rejected the deal due to last-minute Western pressure—causing Putin to cancel a planned November 2003 trip to Chisinau to sign the deal, on the eve of his departure—Moscow did not appear to see immediate risks to its vital interests so long as Transnistria maintained its de facto autonomy and the frozen conflict remained frozen. These two conditions ensured that Russia would retain its role in Moldova and that Moldova would remain stable. Russia’s reaction in its relations with Transnistria was mild by comparison with its recent policy toward Ukraine. Still, according to a former senior career diplomat, the episode had a considerable impact on Putin’s longer-term evaluation of U.S. and Western objectives in Russia’s neighborhood.<sup>87</sup> Understanding this and other lessons that Russia’s leaders draw from U.S. policy choices is also valuable in understanding Russia’s strategic calculus.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Dmitry Ryurikov, “Russia and the United States in the Former Soviet Union: Managing Rivalry or Business-as-Usual,” in *Enduring Rivalry: American and Russian Perspectives on the Post-Soviet Space*, Paul J. Saunders, editor, Center for the National Interest, 2011, p. 43. In the same volume, Russian journalist Alexey Pushkov, now chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs, also highlighted the impact of U.S. efforts to kill the Kozak plan on Putin’s thinking. A leading Russian politician told one of the authors of this paper that Voronin called Putin at midnight the night before Putin’s trip to withdraw from the agreement, after receiving calls from U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana.

## Russia's Operational Calculus and Tools in Influencing Compatriots

Now that we have examined Russia's foreign policy objectives toward Russian compatriots and President Putin's strategic calculus, it is important to understand Russia's operational calculus in its efforts to exert influence on Russian compatriots in neighboring states and the tools at Moscow's disposal. Specifically, we will examine Russia's influence operations through formal government institutions, social and religious movements, media, cyber-attacks, and economic and business ties to Russia.

There are a number of definitions of *operational calculus*. According to the Joint Department of Defense dictionary, *operational art* is the "process of bringing together constraints and priorities in order to achieve your objectives."<sup>88</sup> When using the term *calculus*, we imply deliberation in assessing trade-offs and determining the appropriate course of action. A calculated decision further stipulates that decision-makers consider the impact that their actions will have on operations and policy. Thus, one can say that *operational calculus* is country-level decision-making in selecting among available tools to achieve desired strategic objectives. For the purpose of this paper, we will examine Russia's operational calculus by evaluating *how* the Russian government exerts influence on Russian compatriots in neighboring states.

Geography is a significant general consideration in Russia's operational calculus in influencing Russian compatriots. As noted earlier, Azerbaijan, the Baltic States, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine share borders with Russia, while Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan do not. Shared borders significantly increase Russia's operational capabilities, particularly along

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<sup>88</sup> The joint dictionary defines *operational art* as: "The application of creative imagination by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, and experience—to design strategies, campaigns, and major operations and organize and employ military forces. Operational art integrates ends, ways, and means across the levels of war." Joint Publication 1-02, *DOD Dictionary*.

Russia's more densely populated European borders (as opposed to its Central Asian borders), by facilitating the flow of people, goods, and information.

## The Russian government's direct engagement with compatriot communities

Where possible, Russia's government interacts directly with compatriots through government institutions. As its resources and capabilities have increased over time, the Russian government has expanded its bureaucratic machinery focused on Russian compatriots. In addition to the commission established through Boris Yeltsin's 1994 decree, now known as the Government Commission on the Affairs of Compatriots Abroad (chaired by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov),<sup>89</sup> Russia also has a government-wide commission to help compatriots return to live in Russia.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps more important is *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the Federal Agency for Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation, which then-president Dmitry Medvedev established by decree in September 2008. Though structured as an independent agency, *Rossotrudnichestvo* is bureaucratically subordinate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its director is equivalent in rank to a deputy minister—not unlike the relationship of the U.S. Agency for International Development (which Russian officials consider *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s closest American counterpart) to the Department of State. *Rossotrudnichestvo* received a separate budget allocation to support Russian compatriots for the first time in 2014, amounting to 111.4 million rubles. Of this, the sum of 57.4 million rubles was directed to programs outside Russia (everywhere, not only in the former USSR) and the sum of 47.4 million rubles went to programs in the country.<sup>91</sup> This followed President Putin's call for "strengthening" the agency's "human and resource potential" in his Executive Order

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<sup>89</sup> The commission's very limited web site is at [www.government.ru/department/156/events](http://www.government.ru/department/156/events).

<sup>90</sup> The Interdepartmental Commission for the Implementation of the National Program to Assist the Voluntary Resettlement in Russia of Compatriots Currently Living Abroad, <http://en.kremlin.ru/structure/commissions#institution-4>.

<sup>91</sup> Об основных итогах деятельности Министерства иностранных дел Российской Федерации в 2014 году и задачах на среднесрочную перспективу, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1404057](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1404057)

on Measures to Implement Foreign Policy, one of an extensive series of directives he made shortly after his return to the presidency in 2012.<sup>92</sup>

Like USAID, *Rossotrudnichestvo* has a global mission. In addition to development assistance, public diplomacy, and educational and scientific cooperation, its mission also includes assisting compatriots, promoting Russian language and culture, and protecting historic (for Russia) monuments and burial sites in other countries, often a source of tension due to contending perspectives on Soviet history.<sup>93</sup> Its current leader, Lyubov Glebova, previously directed an independent agency supervising education and science and was earlier a deputy minister of health and social development.<sup>94</sup> *Rossotrudnichestvo* has dozens of representative offices co-located with Russian embassies and consulates; in Ukraine, it has offices in Kiev and in Odessa.<sup>95</sup>

As noted above, the government-supported *Russkiy Mir* Foundation also supports Russian language and culture globally and among Russian compatriots. The chairman of *Russkiy Mir*'s management board is Vyacheslav Nikonov, who is simultaneously chairman of the State Duma Committee on Education and a member of the pro-government United Russia Party.<sup>96</sup>

## Information operations

Russia's extensive information operations (IO) are among its most effective instruments of influence over Russian compatriots and the governments of neighboring countries. According to Joint Publication 3-13, *information operations* are "the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities (IRCs) in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own."<sup>97</sup> As Peter Pomerantsev notes, in an information war, there are "no clear victories, no flags to be planted and borders to be redrawn, only endless

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<sup>92</sup> Executive Order on Measures to Implement Foreign Policy, May 7, 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/15256>.

<sup>93</sup> *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s work is described on its web site, <http://rs.gov.ru/en/activities>.

<sup>94</sup> For a full biography, see <http://rs.gov.ru/en/person/4560>.

<sup>95</sup> See <http://rs.gov.ru/en/missions> for a complete list.

<sup>96</sup> Nikonov also happens to be a grandson of former Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov.

<sup>97</sup> Joint Publication 3-13, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp3\\_13.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_13.pdf).

mind games in the ‘psychosphere’, where victory might be the opposite of what you initially supposed.”<sup>98</sup>

Russia’s IO efforts are in many respects a legacy of the Soviet Union’s extensive infrastructure to produce and disseminate propaganda internally and externally. Russia’s IO dramatically increased in scope in recent years with the founding of Russia Today (RT), Russia’s state-sponsored news channel for foreign audiences, and the consolidation of government-sponsored media entities targeting foreign audiences. The Ukraine crisis has produced further growth.

Russia’s IO aims not only to influence Russian compatriots in neighboring countries, but more generally to project the image of a strong and powerful nation-state capable of interfering in its neighbors’ affairs with ease and at a moment’s notice. In this section, we discuss some of the operational tactics that Russia has used to influence Russian compatriots in the information domain.

## Media messaging to Russian compatriots

Russia has multiple tools in its “tool box” to conduct its IO campaign. One of the motivations behind the latest wave of IO efforts is to spread *dezinformatsiya*, or disinformation, to confuse audiences and present alternative perspectives favorable toward Russian foreign policy. *Dezinformatsiya* is relatively quick, cheap, and very effective. One tactic to distribute *dezinformatsiya* is to use online trolls, whether automated or human, to post pro-Moscow comments and information on the internet and social media in order to sway opinion.<sup>99</sup> These commentators often obscure information, falsify facts, and edit or fabricate images to generate suspicion, confusion, and fear in the audience.<sup>100</sup>

In some instances, “troll armies,” groups of online pro-Kremlin, pro-Putin regime bloggers, spread *dezinformatsiya*. Recent reporting indicates that troll armies manage multiple fake accounts and post articles and responses to blogs and messages on social media 50 to 100 times a day.<sup>101</sup> For example, when Forbes

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<sup>98</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, “Inside the Kremlin’s Hall of Mirrors, *The Guardian*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/09/kremlin-hall-of-mirrors-military-information-psychology>.

<sup>99</sup> Alicia Sternstein, “U.S. Intelligence Community Keys in on Russian Troll Army Manipulating Social Media, NextGov, August 17, 2015, <http://www.nextgov.com/defense/2015/08/us-intelligence-community-keys-russian-troll-army-manipulating-social-media/119158/>.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Daisy Sindelar, “The Kremlin’s Troll Army,” *The Atlantic*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-kremlins-troll-army/375932/>.



columnist Paul Gregory alleged in an article that Russian separatists might have shot down Malaysia Airlines flight 17 over Ukraine, he received more than 100 comments from the Russian troll army.<sup>102</sup> Another report indicates that at one “troll factory” in St. Petersburg, employees receive over \$500 a month to pose as internet users defending the pro-Putin regime, and to spread conspiracy theories of Western leaders and those of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>103</sup>

Russian state media also spread *dezinformatsiya* to influence Russian compatriots in neighboring countries. For example, RT has significant operations throughout Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, including the Baltic States, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. RT provides programming in Russian, English, and the native language of each country—e.g., in Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian in the Baltic States.<sup>104</sup> In eastern and southern Ukraine, and Russian-occupied Crimea, half of the population accesses Russian TV for news.<sup>105</sup> According to the State Committee of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine, up to 80% of RT’s broadcast time is non-Ukrainian content, primarily from Russia.<sup>106</sup>

Russia’s domestic media can also be influential among Russian compatriots, particularly in neighboring countries where broadcast media are available over the air. Even those segments of the population who may prefer to watch Ukrainian-language television often end up watching significant programming in Russian since it is higher in quality and cheaper for Ukrainian broadcasters to purchase.<sup>107</sup> Significantly, the Russian Duma recently approved a \$121 million increase in funding for Russia’s two principal state-supported domestic television companies, VGTRK

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<sup>102</sup> Alicia Sternstein, “U.S. Intelligence Community Keys in.”

<sup>103</sup> Shaun Walker, “Salutin’ Putin: Inside a Russian Troll House,” *The Guardian*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/putin-kremlin-inside-russian-troll-house>,

<sup>104</sup> Richard Martyn-Hemphill and Etienne Morisseau, “Baltics in Front Line of Information War.” *The Baltic Times*, April 4, 2015, [http://www.baltictimes.com/baltics\\_in\\_front\\_line\\_of\\_information\\_war/](http://www.baltictimes.com/baltics_in_front_line_of_information_war/).

<sup>105</sup> Natalya Ryabinska, “The Media Market and Media Ownership in post-Communist Ukraine: Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism,” *Problems of Post-Communism*. November/December 2011, p. 14.

<sup>106</sup> V. Kaspruk, “Chy mozhlyva realna derusyfikaciia Ukraïny?” (Is Real De-Russification of Ukraine Possible?), Radio Svoboda (August 24, 2009), [www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/1806505.html?page=1 and x=1#relatedInfoContainer/](http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/1806505.html?page=1&x=1#relatedInfoContainer/), accessed September 21, 2011.

<sup>107</sup> Natalya Ryabinska, “Media Market and Media Ownership,” p. 13.

(the All-Russia State Television and Radio Company, which operates the Russia-1 and related channels, including a 24-hour news channel) and Russia's Channel 1.<sup>108</sup>

## Censorship of the internet

Internet censorship also serves to counter Western influence and to spread pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin information and policies. Since most Russian-language content online originates within Russia's borders, Russia's domestic online censorship affects the Russian media that the compatriots consume in neighboring countries.

In recent years, Putin has consolidated the control of the internet, a virtual space that in the past was not under strict regulation. In the past year, the Russian parliament passed legislation requiring that any blogger with over 3,000 followers must register his/her personal information with the Russian government, and will be held to the same "journalistic" standards as any major news source. Additionally, the internet law requires that all internet companies operating webpages within Russia must house their user data so that those data are available to Russian security services.<sup>109</sup>

Many in Western media have expressed concerns that the law's aim is to silence bloggers and social media outlets that oppose the Putin regime and Putin's policies. Perhaps further underscoring the concerns of those who believe in free expression, President Putin stated, "You do know that it all began initially, when the Internet first appeared, as a special CIA project. And this is the way it is developing."<sup>110</sup> These laws have also affected social media: Pavel Durov, the CEO of *Vkontakte*, a Russian version of Facebook, was "elbowed" out of the company and fled to the Caribbean. *Vkontakte* is now under the control of Alisher Usmanov, a strong ally of the Putin regime. Usmanov's holding company mail.ru now owns all three major social media websites in Russia.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> State Duma passes amendments to 2015 budgets. Interfax. 3 July 2015, <http://www.interfax.ru/business/451428>. Some of the funding was reportedly to compensate for the decline in the Russian ruble.

<sup>109</sup> Cory Flintoff, "Putin Internet Plan Requires 'Sharing' with Security Services." May 6, 2014. National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/05/06/309833033/putins-internet-plan-requires-sharing-with-security-services>,

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Martyn-Hemphill and Morisseau, "Baltics in Front Line of Information War."

## Cyber-attacks

One of Russia's most dangerous tools is its ability to orchestrate impressive cyber-attacks on government and non-governmental computer networks, including in neighboring countries, to apply economic and political pressure and to create fear and chaos. Cyber-attacks that appear politically motivated can also have important symbolic impact among compatriots and contribute to mobilizing their communities. Russian cyber-attacks are often planned and orchestrated by independent hackers supported by the Russian government. According to James Clapper, U.S. director of national intelligence, Russia is "establishing its own cyber command" that is responsible for "conducting offensive cyber activities."<sup>112</sup>

Russia started attacking computer networks in neighboring countries long before the Ukraine conflict erupted. In 2007, Estonia was the victim of one of Russia's largest cyber-attacks, after the Estonian parliament voted to remove the Bronze Soldier statue from Tallinn's city center. The statue had particular significance to Russian nationalists and compatriots alike as it commemorated the Soviet victory over the Nazis during World War II. After extensive media criticism and violent public protests against the Estonian parliament's action, many in Estonia's government, business establishment, and media outlets woke up one April morning to find that their computer systems had been attacked.<sup>113</sup> While nothing has been proven, many in Estonia and the West suspect that Moscow was behind this attack, which was the largest cyber-attack that Estonia had ever seen.<sup>114</sup>

Since then, Russia has expanded cyber-attacks to influence other neighboring countries, particularly those with significant Russian compatriot populations. Cyber-attacks in Ukraine have increased significantly since the annexation of Crimea. While Western media have focused on military operations in eastern Ukraine, there subsequently have been over 100 low-tech cyber-attacks on Ukraine's government and non-government organizations.<sup>115</sup> Many of these attacks have featured "black energy," malware designed to remotely take over computer networks.<sup>116</sup> Russian

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<sup>112</sup> James Clapper, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community. Statement for the Record. Senate Armed Services Committee. February 26, 2015.; [http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper\\_02-26-15.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper_02-26-15.pdf),

<sup>113</sup> Pomerantsev, "Inside the Kremlin's Hall of Mirrors."

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Owen Matthews, "Russia's Greatest Weapon May Be Its Hackers," *Newsweek*, May 7, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/05/15/russias-greatest-weapon-may-be-its-hackers-328864.html>

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

hackers also attack major financial institutions; however, it is unclear whether these attacks are motivated by politics or by money. In 2013 and 2014, Russian hackers raided over 100 banks in Ukraine, the United States, Europe, Russia, and Japan. Analysts estimate that \$900 million was collectively stolen from these institutions.<sup>117</sup>

## Economic influence and corruption

Business relationships—whether fully legitimate or not—are another element of Russia's influence in neighboring countries. In this context, Russian compatriots provide an economic point-of-entry by virtue of their contacts and local knowledge. This can be a significant advantage for Russia, given its economic goals in the region.

Russia's overall objective is to sustain and expand market access and trade flows with other successor states of the former USSR—particularly Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, which together amounted to nearly 15% of Russia's exports in 2012. (The remaining former Soviet countries total to under 2%; the three Baltic States combine to about 3%).<sup>118</sup> Of course, the Kremlin's initial concerns over Ukraine's Association Agreement with the European Union were related to Russia's market access in Ukraine and, conversely, potential entry into Russian markets of EU goods re-exported through Ukraine.

Russia also seeks to control energy pipelines carrying its exports to Europe (and elsewhere). Russia's considerable energy exports can provide leverage in dealing with its customers, but only so long as Moscow has sufficient control. Absent that control, pipelines make Russia vulnerable in relations with transit countries. Ownership of pipelines has thus been a high priority and a consistent goal for major companies such as Gazprom.

Russian compatriots play important roles in linking Russia's economy with neighboring states. One prominent example is Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, whose DTEK energy firm incorporates six Ukrainian and three Russian coal companies.<sup>119</sup> Akhmetov was a leading supporter of former Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich, who spoke only Russian prior to his appointment as prime

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology Observatory of Economic Complexity, [https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/explore/tree\\_map/hs/export/rus/show/all/2012/](https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/explore/tree_map/hs/export/rus/show/all/2012/).

<sup>119</sup> DTEK 2014 Integrated Report, p. 14, <http://www.dtek.com/library/file/annual-report2014-en.pdf>.

minister in 2002.<sup>120</sup> Although Akhmetov has since publicly sided with the Kiev government in its dispute with separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region,<sup>121</sup> many continue to accuse him of supporting or collaborating with the separatists.<sup>122</sup> Akhmetov is also a useful example in that he highlights the fact that Russian compatriots need not be ethnic Russians, as compatriots are defined by Moscow to include individuals from other ethnic groups predominantly residing in Russia. Akhmetov is an ethnic Tatar.<sup>123</sup>

## The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church

From the tsarist era, through the Soviet period, into the present day, the Russian Orthodox Church has had an intimate relationship with the Russian state. Tsar Nicholas I (1796-1855) played a key role in binding the church to the state when he formulated his ideology of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality" as Russia's guiding philosophy.<sup>124</sup> Officially atheist Soviet leaders later suborned the Orthodox Church's leadership in order to ensure control over its remaining followers.

Though Orthodoxy is weaker today than in the past, Vladimir Putin has often publicly proclaimed his Orthodox faith and appears increasingly to be linking Orthodoxy with Russian identity—though he is also careful to craft a national identity that incorporates Russia's Muslims and Jews.

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<sup>120</sup> "Viktor Yanukovich," [www.britannica.com/biography/Viktor-Yanukovich](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Viktor-Yanukovich).

<sup>121</sup> J. Y. and T. J., "Rinat Akhmetov's choice," *The Economist*, May 20, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/05/ukraine>.

<sup>122</sup> See Alyona Zhuk, "Separatist leader hails relationship between Akhmetov and self-proclaimed republic," *Kyiv Post*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/kyiv-post-plus/separatist-leader-hails-relationship-with-akhmetov-and-his-business-in-self-proclaimed-republic-385208.html>, which asserts that separatists have refrained from seizing Mariupol because the port there serves Akhmetov's firms. See also "Донбоссы," *Новая Газета*, Павел Каныгин, August 23, 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/69639.html>, which alleges that Akhmetov supports Aleksandr Khodakovsky, a former leader of Donetsk-based Ukrainian security services who now controls the separatist Vostok Brigade.

<sup>123</sup> Daisy Sindelar, "In Donetsk, A 'Self-Made' Oligarch Learns To Play Nicely With Others," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 11, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/akhmetov-oligarch-ukraine-profile-russia-donas/25329830.html>. Akhmetov's family is from Tatarstan, in the Russian Federation. They are not Crimean Tatars.

<sup>124</sup> Nicholas Riasanovsky, "Nicholas I," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicholas-I-tsar-of-Russia>.

The Russian Orthodox Church not only has unified Russians living in and out of Russia, but also has increasingly aligned itself with Vladimir Putin's regime. For example, on the 1,000-year anniversary of the death of St. Vladimir, the spiritual leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, reiterated the spiritual unity of all living on the territory of Ancient Rus. He suggested that the post-Soviet states exist on the territory of a greater ethno-cultural state:

Although there are different independent states on the territory of Ancient Rus' today, I believe their people desire to be united spiritually. For our lives are based on one faith, selected by the holy Prince Vladimir, the individual who formed the contours of the great Eurasian state on whose territory these independent countries exist today.<sup>125</sup>

Top Russian officials often praise the Russian Orthodox Church and its affiliates for building close ties with the Russian compatriots in neighboring states. In a Bishops' Convention in Moscow, President Putin emphasized that millions of ethnic Russians communicate with Russia through the church in neighboring countries.<sup>126</sup> This is particularly significant as the Russian Orthodox Church provides an outlet to strategically influence Russian compatriots in neighboring states in all spheres of public life, including social institutions, charity, science, and the military. Further, the church serves as a strategic messaging tool to advocate conservative values in neighboring states, and to draw a contrast with Western "ultra-liberal values."<sup>127</sup>

In addition, Russia uses like-minded independent organizations affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church to form ties with and influence Russian compatriots in neighboring countries. For example, Konstantin Malofeyev, founder and director of the Fund of St. Basil the Great, funds programs abroad that are affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church and the government, particularly in countries with Russian compatriot populations. In a recent interview with Gazeta.ru, Malofeyev said:

We are creating a network of formal as well as informal ties...As for our international activity, here we are always in communication with

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<sup>125</sup> "Приём по случаю тысячелетия святого равноапостольного князя Владимира," Website of the President of Russia, 29 July 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50068>, accessed 6 July 2015.

<sup>126</sup> "Russian Church praised for building Diaspora Ties," The Voice of Russia, February 2013, [http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/2013\\_02\\_01/Russian-Church-praised-for-building-Diaspora-ties/](http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/2013_02_01/Russian-Church-praised-for-building-Diaspora-ties/).

<sup>127</sup> Vitaly Shevchenko, "Russian Orthodox Church Lends Weight to Putin Patriotism," BBC, August 21, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33982267>.

the relevant ministries and the international committee of the State Duma, with official diplomats...But the most important thing is direct presence in countries where we work with our like-minded colleagues.<sup>128</sup>

Through his Fund of St. Basil the Great, Malofeyev promotes and supports the Orthodox Church, education and religious activities, national programs, and charity and aid for children.<sup>129</sup> This not only provides a sense of unity and commonality, but also allows the Russian government and its supporters to use social and religious institutions as a means to indirectly influence the targeted ethnic Russian population. By doing so, Russia is able to drive a wedge between Russian compatriots and the countries they reside in, and to align Russian compatriots more closely with the Russian state. In effect, through social and religious influence, Russia has a strategic tool to influence the socio-cultural and political affairs of neighboring countries of the former Soviet Union.

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<sup>128</sup> Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, "With Cash and Conspiracy Theories, Russian Orthodox Philanthropist Malofeyev is Useful to the Kremlin," *The Interpreter*, 28 April 2015, <http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-193-putin-appeals-to-militia-of-novorossiya/>.

<sup>129</sup> Fund of St. Basil the Great, <http://fondsvv.ru/activity/national/>.

# Implications

Russia's policy toward compatriots in neighboring countries has important implications for the United States, as it considers how to shape and influence policy toward Russia and affected countries in the former Soviet Union. Having examined Russia's objectives toward the compatriots in neighboring countries, and further assessed Russia's strategic and operational calculus to achieve its objectives, we divide our implications into implications for Russia and broad strategic and operational implications for the United States and its allies. They are presented in this order below.

## Implications for Russia

Before assessing strategic and operational implications for the United States and its allies, we believe it is useful to assess the implications of Russia's approaches for its own longer-term interests and objectives, as these implications create certain dilemmas and constraints for Moscow. These are described below.

**1. Russia's use of compatriots in the region requires not only their cultural but also their political identification with Moscow and its aims.** Gaps between Russian compatriots' cultural identification and their political identification complicate efforts to mobilize these groups for broader political purposes as opposed to narrow issues of language rights, educational options, and other social concerns, including ease of travel to Russia. Relatively satisfied compatriot populations will be less amenable to mobilization. Large-scale mobilization requires that Russian compatriots see an existential or near-existential threat to their way of life—something not presently visible outside Ukraine.

**2. Continuous efforts to employ Russian compatriots as an instrument of Russian foreign policy are likely to produce diminishing returns.** If host government and majority populations in neighboring states begin to view Russian compatriots as essentially foreign groups that act in Russia's interests rather than in the interests of their states of citizenship/residence, those compatriots are likely to face growing skepticism and even hostility as they pursue their political or other objectives. This could generate political—or violent—backlash against them and might even lead to conflict.



**3. Conversely, if Russia’s government appears to use Russian compatriots without producing tangible benefits—or, indeed, at the expense of their interests and lives—Moscow risks alienating not only those with which it is directly engaged, but also Russian compatriots in other countries.** Some Russian compatriots might welcome peaceful Crimea-style annexation to Russia, but few likely aspire to the grinding and destructive civil war underway in eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin’s manifest unwillingness to absorb those territories or to provide significant assistance beyond arms, food, and emergency supplies could thus deter Russian compatriots elsewhere from pursuing their aims through violence.

**4. Russian compatriots are a blunt instrument.** Setting aside the evolving Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, Russia generally does not exert operational control over compatriots or the institutions they create. Even in those cases, however, Russian policy aims depend on local actors with their own objectives, tactics, and timelines. Outside times of crisis, Russian compatriots can be most useful to Moscow in attempting to enforce boundaries on policy choices by the government of their country of residence—for example, in opposing cooperation with Western institutions or defending the rights of their communities, and in creating or threatening political crises to justify direct political, economic, or military pressure from Moscow. They have limited capacity to force specific actions by national governments.

**5. Deliberately provoking large-scale violent conflict is a “nuclear option” with unpredictable and possibly very dangerous consequences, including for the compatriot populations that the Russian government has committed to protect and potentially for Russia itself.** If the Russian compatriots of the Donbas remain inside Ukraine—which seems quite likely, since Russia has not offered otherwise—their lives will be far more difficult in the coming years than they have been in the past. Large-scale fighting, like what is underway in eastern Ukraine, also risks escalation in Russia’s broader confrontation with the West. That said, if Russia’s leaders expect Washington to back down if faced with direct conflict between nuclear-armed states, as some likely do, they may consider this an acceptable risk.

**6. Reintegrating Russian compatriots into Russia through immigration or through territorial acquisitions inherently weakens their role as instruments of influence.** Kazakhstan’s Russian compatriot community is significantly smaller than it was when the Soviet Union collapsed. Ukraine has perhaps 2 million fewer Russian compatriots following Moscow’s annexation of Crimea. Though it is impossible to predict Ukraine’s future presidential elections, it appears much less likely that the country will elect another president from eastern Ukraine, as Viktor Yanukovich was. This alone will diminish Russia’s political influence in Ukraine in the future—and even dealing with Yanukovich, the Kremlin experienced many disappointments.

## Strategic implications for the United States and U.S. allies

Whatever the outcome of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the current tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship are likely to endure. Political elites in Washington and Moscow harbor considerable mistrust of one another's intent that will shape bilateral relations for some time. At the same time, Russia retains the capability to threaten vital U.S. national interests or to assist the United States in advancing them. This context necessitates consideration of key strategic implications of Russia's policy toward compatriots in the former Soviet region. The ones listed below are among the most notable.

**1. Existing Western and Russian definitions of regional security in Eurasia are incompatible and will remain a source of tension.** Russia's determination to be an acknowledged great power requires a level of influence in its immediate neighborhood that the United States and its allies have been unwilling to accept. Until the West and Russia find a mutually acceptable European security architecture, policy-makers should expect new conflicts to erupt.

**2. Russia's leadership is prepared to take significant—perhaps even unexpected or seemingly irrational—risks to defend vital interests.** As a result, it is essential for U.S. and Western decision-makers to understand how Russia's leaders define vital national interests as well as their narrower vital personal interests, rather than projecting U.S. or Western perspectives of what those interests should be. Only through this approach can U.S. and Western decision-makers anticipate Moscow's responses to their own policy choices.

**3. Because Russia's definition of security for its citizens and compatriots in its immediate neighborhood requires stability, Moscow may be open to mutually satisfactory understandings to maintain stability.** Instability that creates ungoverned or weakly governed zones along Russia's borders facilitates terrorism, drug trafficking, and other security threats. Moscow accepts stable frozen conflicts, such as those in Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, but prefers strong central governments that respect Russian government perspectives and Russian compatriot populations.

**4. Russian compatriot populations are significant and—withstanding migration to Russia—enduring; thus, tensions surrounding their rights, treatment, and grievances are likely to endure too.** High levels of Russian public support for Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea suggest that even many in Russia's opposition identify with Moscow's former imperial/Soviet territories and the Russian compatriots who live there. This raises the possibility that a more Western-oriented

Russia could retain existing objectives and policies. More focused consideration of these populations and Western policy toward them seems appropriate.

**5. Effective management by host governments limits Russia's opportunities to exploit Russian compatriots.** Moscow is most successful in mobilizing compatriot populations with significant economic and/or social grievances. Governments that address these grievances and build mutual trust with their Russian compatriot populations will be less vulnerable. Integration of Russian compatriots in a way that facilitates their political identification with their countries of residence is a powerful tool for governments in the region in blunting Moscow's influence in their societies. Steps to constrain Russian compatriots' political activity or cultural rights are likely both to alienate those populations and to provide Moscow with fodder for its public diplomacy messaging—if not with pretexts for aggressive policy measures.

## Operational implications

Russia's policy toward Russian compatriots also has more immediate repercussions for America and for U.S. allies as they make near-term decisions. We consider the following to be among the significant operational implications.

**1. A better understanding of Russia's policy and actions toward Russian compatriots in neighboring countries is critical to U.S. policy toward Russia and its neighborhood.** Russian compatriots are a valuable policy instrument for Moscow, yet U.S. and Western governments have not thoroughly examined the many potential axes along which Russia can exercise influence, ranging from political parties to Russian and local Russian-language media to formal and informal relationships.

**2. U.S. messaging to compatriot communities is at least as important as messaging to wider populations in Russia's neighborhood.** Improving Russian compatriots' understanding of U.S. and Western objectives in relation to the former Soviet Union could mitigate existing perceived threats. Further, developing counter-messaging and counter-narratives to balance Russia's information operations will continue to be vital in the battle of ideas. Equally important is the continuous effort to strengthen new media outlets and freedom of expression.

**3. Corruption creates additional pathways for Russian influence in compatriot communities and beyond, and can constitute a threat to national security.** Corruption that establishes relationships of dependence—whether political or economic—can enable Russian influence both directly and indirectly. Corruption in military and security services can be dangerous if it compromises these institutions.

**4. Russia is likely to continue sponsoring cyber-attacks on governments and non-governmental organizations that work against its interests in the former Soviet**

**region, especially in states with significant and dissatisfied compatriot populations.** Stronger security measures—and improved attribution capabilities—will be important.

## Conclusion

Russia's policies in its neighborhood are likely to remain assertive in the near term, particularly in dealing with states with which Moscow and Russian compatriots articulate grievances. Under such circumstances, examining and responding to Russia's policies will take on even greater importance for U.S. policy-makers. Particular importance will need to be placed on how to counter Russia's influence on Russian compatriots in neighboring countries, and its interference into the affairs of host nation governments. As part of this effort, an understanding of the host governments' capacity to counter Russian influence in political, economic, security, and information domains will be paramount.

Our intent for this study is to have an initial open dialogue about Russia's use of the compatriots as an influence tactic in neighboring countries. To pursue this task effectively, further robust analysis must be undertaken in order to assess Russia's objectives, its strategic calculus, and its operational decision-making and tactics, and to understand Moscow's perspectives and motives on its terms.

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